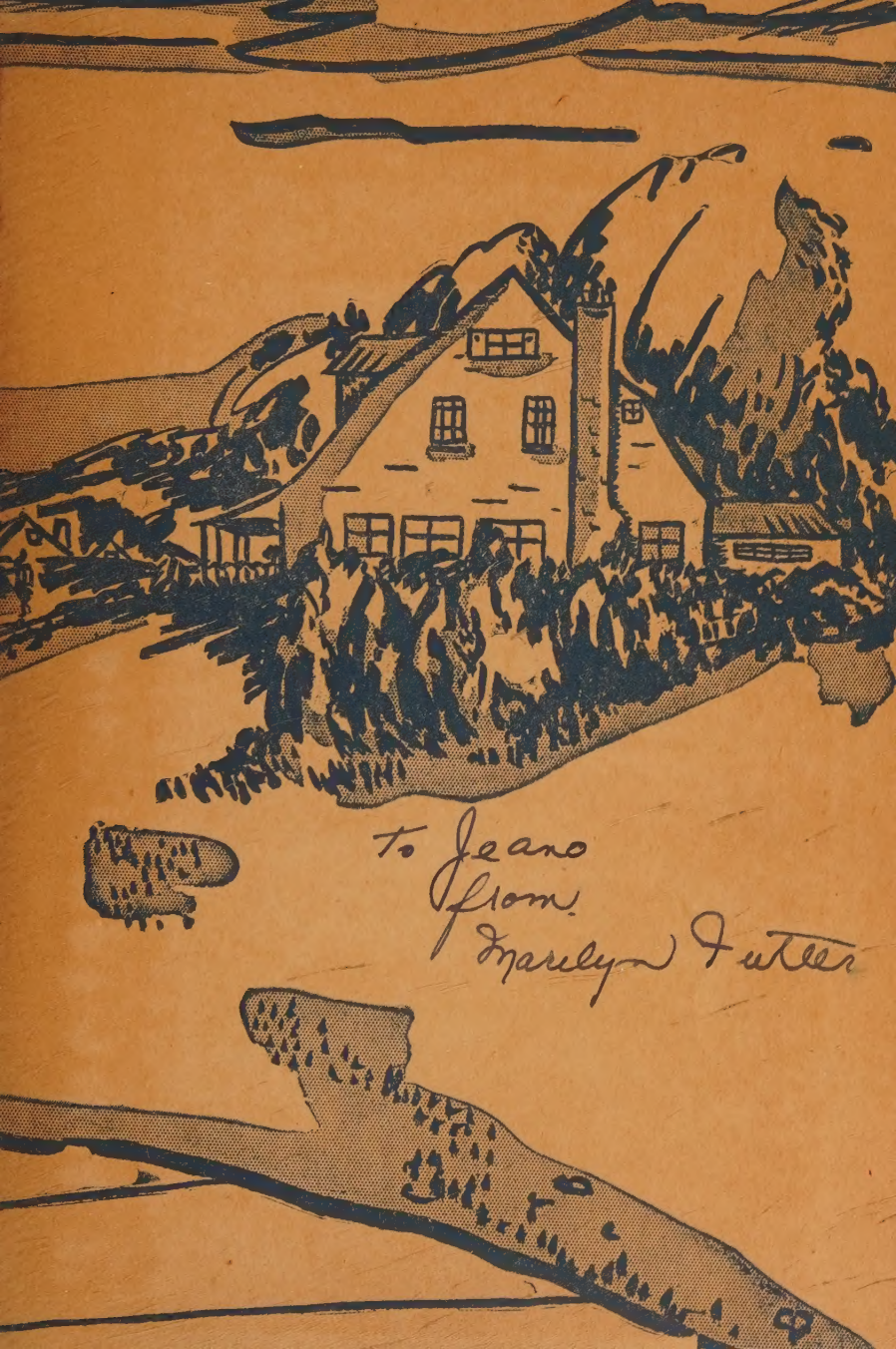
BLACK FLOWER

JANE D. ABBOTT



to Jeane
from
Marilyn Fuller

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By

JANE ABBOTT

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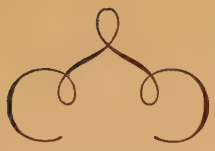


CHAPTER I

THE first bell for dismissal rang through the Merridam school. "Theodate, remain in your seat, please," said Miss Ames over the general stir.

Theodate Waring slumped down in her seat, stretching her long legs under the scarred desk. She tilted her nose to show her indifference to the sly glances turned toward her as the boys and girls filed out to go down to the cloakrooms. As if she cared a straw!

She wondered, only indifferently, why Miss Ames was keeping her. It might be because of any number of misdemeanors. Maybe tardiness—she'd been late three times this week. Old Jasper had let her row his boat. Or maybe that picture she'd drawn of Miss Ames, that *did* look like her—especially the mole on her nose. Maybe it was that old English theme—

All she hoped was that Miss Ames would come back quickly and get it over with. She didn't want to stay in long—with spring riding the world and Jasper telling her she could use the boat until half-past four. If Miss Ames kept her longer than usual —by familiarity Theo knew to a second the length of Miss Ames' lectures—she'd miss Jard. He'd get

away before she had a chance to tell him Jasper would let them use the boat.

Miss Ames had followed the last pupil into the hall. It was her duty to watch the queue trudge down to the basement. As long as she could hear those shuffling feet outside of the door Theo knew she was alone. She might catch Jard—the third floor boys always got out ahead of the others. She ran to the window and opened it and hung far out, at the peril of losing her balance.

The gravel space under the window, known by usage as the boys' yard, was rapidly filling with youngsters. Some ran at once on out to the street, others loitered, talking, in little groups. The smaller boys tumbled about in an excess of spirits, released from the constraint of the school hours. One of these, little Charley Parker, dodging a tagging hand, fell roughly back against Joe Brace, an older lad, of stocky build, who promptly swung on him, caught him by the shoulders, threw him to the ground and began to pummel him.

"I'll teach you not to get fresh with me!"

A circle enclosed the boys. Someone cried: "Lay off, Joe. You've taught him a lesson." Another warned: "Better quit, Joe."

Theo's voice shrilled indignantly above little Charley Parker's bawling. "Why don't you hit a fellow your own size, Joe Brace?"

At that every face, including Joe's, lifted to the second floor window.

"Mind your own business!" Joe retorted, his red face growing a little redder. "Tell your brother that I'll fight him—anytime. The sissy!"

"He isn't a sissy!"

"Singin' to the birds! Tra-la! Tra-la!" Joe piped. The crowd laughed. While the attention of the older boys was thus momentarily diverted little Charley Parker and his chums slipped away.

Theo's hands itched so terribly to hold Joe Brace's thick, slightly dirty neck that she had to clench them together.

"I guess a bird wouldn't listen to you. I guess you wouldn't know one if you saw one! You don't know *anything,* you—you—big bozo." All of which was far from what Theo wanted to say.

"I don't—huh! Guess I know enough—about your Percy-boy. He's a coward, he is! He's afraid to fight anyone. He's a yellow sap."

"You're a liar, Joe Brace. A mean, beastly liar and I'll make you take that back——"

"Theodate!"

It was Miss Ames, inopportunely returning. She caught the girl not too gently by the arm and dragged her back from the window.

"Shame on you! A girl of your age yelling to the boys out of the window. What *are* we going to do with you?"

"Did you see what Joe Brace was doing? Beating the life out of a little fellow?" Theo protested hotly. "You'd interfere yourself ——" But she stopped on that. She knew Miss Ames *wouldn't* interfere. She straightened scornfully and stalked after Miss Ames' rigid back to the chair beside the desk.

"Sit down," commanded Miss Ames.

Theo sat down, keeping her glance away from Miss Ames.

"Sulky," thought the older woman, her exasperation mounting. The tired lines around her mouth deepened and the little flush on her cheeks spread to her neck. Her lips trembled in her effort at self-control. She began making marks on a pad in front of her, as if she were checking off the details of her duty.

"Theodate," she began heavily, "I asked you to remain with me to go over your English paper. It was a disgraceful paper. Careless in construction." The lead pencil dug deep into the pad to emphasize that. "But I am afraid I must talk to you about things even more important than your English paper. How old are you, Theodate?"

"Fifteen." "She knows exactly how old I am," Theo thought, impatiently.

"Fifteen—the most beautiful age of girlhood. At fifteen a girl should be budding into the lovely promise of her womanhood. Do you think your hoydenish ways promise much for the years to come,

my dear?" Miss Ames had herself in hand now. She even put her fingers gently on Theo's arm.

But the girl drew herself away. "I haven't thought anything about it," she answered promptly. She stole a glance at the clock. It was now half-past three. They couldn't have the boat after half-past four—and goodness knew where Jard might be now!

Miss Ames made marks on the pad again. Plainly she couldn't reach this girl through her usual approach of "blossoming." "You are a problem," she began again, with fresh patience. "Your school work is poor, very poor, and that is the more lamentable because you really have brains, only you won't use them. Your conduct is deplorable—for one of your age. You ought to be setting a better example for the younger girls in school. I am going to ask you to think it all over, quietly. Surely you must want to be a credit to your family even if you do not care for the approval of your teachers and your schoolmates ——"

Twenty-five minutes of four! Theo wriggled restlessly.

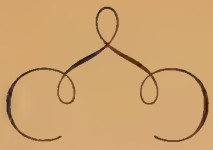
"Character is more priceless than gold ——" Miss Ames was beginning when she noticed Theo's eyes on the clock. Irritation threatened her composure. She paused to control it and Theo turned eagerly to her. "Is that all, Miss Ames?" she asked hopefully.

"All for the present." Miss Ames answered with a crisp edge in her voice. "I thought I might be able

to appeal to your better self but ——" She let the sentence dangle that Theo might know her doubt. "I may add that we are almost at the end of our endurance. And you must rewrite your English theme and bring it to me, tomorrow." She waved her hand in dismissal.

Theo bolted from the room and ran to the basement where she snatched her sweater from her locker. "She didn't have to take all that time just to tell me to do that old paper over again," she stormed inwardly. Half the lovely afternoon gone!

The school yard was deserted. The street beyond it had recovered its quiet. She paused on the walk, undetermined which way to go. If she went home Jard might not be there, or, if he were, he'd probably be doing something else. She turned north toward the river and Jasper's old boat-landing.



CHAPTER II

THE "river" cut Merridam into two distinct parts. The west side was new and macadamed and built up in brick and fresh-painted wood and stucco and inclined to considerable scorn for old Merridam on the east side where the houses for the most part were weather-gray and rambling and the roads muddy in fall and winter and dusty in summer. Theodate Waring lived in the oldest and grayest and most rambling of the old houses on the muddiest street and by all the laws of proper conduct, on her dismissal from school, should have crossed the bridge in the heart of the village and pursued a decorous way homeward. But Theo knew no laws of conduct —nearly always depending upon impulse alone to direct her. She turned now up the river, following the walk that paralleled it.

It wouldn't be much fun using the boat without Jard! She'd thought they might scull up the river as far as the Island. Last summer Jard had put up some bird houses in the miniature forest of trees that covered the island and maybe a nest had been built, already! She'd bet Jard the birds wouldn't use the houses when they had real trees to keep house in and Jard had bet they would. He'd said birds had sense

enough to see how much better shelter the houses offered than trees. She hoped Jard was right! It was so much more fun to have Jard right and to see his eyes get all shiny as if it surprised him every time he *was* right.

The macadam stopped at the end of two blocks and gave way to a narrow dirt road. On one side was a woodland and Theo immediately plunged into it, stepping through the bracken carefully, that she might not tread on any tender shoots. She began to sniff delightedly at the pungent odor of damp earth and fresh growth and her dour look lightened. When she heard the sweet sudden high note of a bird she stopped short in an ecstasy of listening. She pursed her lips as if to answer but she made no sound. It was only Jard who could call the birds in their own music!

When she did not hear the bird-note again she went on, following a narrow trail that came out again at the road. Jasper's landing was a quarter of a mile beyond, on the other side of the river. Jasper lived in what Merridam called a shanty, though Theo always had thought it was a most intriguing domicile, because it was put together much like a patch-work house. Merridam said that Jasper was crazy—harmlessly so, but Theo knew he was not. He had wonderful stories on his tongue's end for her and Jard—stories of the sea which he had sailed when he was a boy and which might sound crazy to skeptical

grown-ups but not to them. Now he made a living ferrying people across the river, for to come from the shabbiest part of the old village and cross the river in Jasper's boat and follow the road over which Theo had walked to the shingle mill and the brick-yards which were Merridam's principal industries, saved the workmen ten minutes and kept Jasper in tobacco and food.

When Theo was very small and Jard only an inch taller by the nicks in the doorframe where Dad measured them Jasper had let them ride in the boat while he was ferrying passengers across—ride for nothing. Theo still could remember the delicious dizzying sensation of the swing of the long flat boat as she clung in the bow-seat. She thought Jasper more heroic than any hero of his wild tales as he stood in the stern, grizzled, broad-chested, his eyes little bright pricks of black under their shaggy brows. And then when she was older, one unforgettable day, Jasper had let her scull herself! "Ye're a handy little cuss," he'd told her. Jasper said she was "handier" than Jard which had made Theo only half-glad for she did not like to do anything better than Jard. If Jard didn't stop to stare at the puffs of cloud in the sky, or follow a bird winging high above them he could scull better than anyone in the world, Theo had explained to Jasper, but Jasper only had closed his eyes up tight and cackled.

At a turn in the road, Jasper's cottage, across the

river, came in view, and, reaching it, Theo stopped short with disappointment. Jasper was pushing up river in the old boat, on some errand of his own. She was too far away to hail him—now she would have to wait until he came back, to get across herself. Certainly Miss Ames had spoiled her whole afternoon!

The last guard of an old apple orchard skirted the road at the turn. Now the trees were in first blossoming, like great pink bouquets, and the beauty of them lured Theo, left stranded. She'd lie under them until time for Jasper to come over for his first load of passengers. She flung herself down in the soft deep grass and folded her hands under her head. How different it looked, staring up! She saw nothing but pink, thick as thick, and through it the blue sky. It all moved ever so little, back and forth, and there were special, secret little stirrings as if the blossoms were alive and laughing with one another, secret laughter that no one could hear. If Jard were with her he could explain it! Jard always had words at his command while poor Theo just had to feel things and couldn't *say* anything about them.

Like her English theme—she had chosen to write about the Siege of Lucknow and she had got very excited thinking about it, all hot and sad and goose-pimply, but when it came to writing, why—it had been a flop! Now Miss Ames had said she must write it over again. And it might be the same the next time.

Well, she wouldn't write about the Siege of Lucknow. She'd try something else—maybe apple blossoms. She squinted up at the pink canopy. "They shut me in a pink cloud ——" she began aloud and stopped. No, that didn't get anywhere. There was something else about them she wanted to say. How funny it was that just a few months ago these same boughs were stark bare and gray and old and now they'd burst out in all this pink beauty. Why, it was like a miracle! And they were so proud of their lovely budding—that was why they stirred and whispered. And in a little while these blossoms would be gone and the trees would hang with beautiful round red apples ——

Suddenly Theo remembered what Miss Ames had said. A girl blossomed —— She scowled at having *anything* Miss Ames had said intrude itself upon her pleasant contemplation of the loveliness around her. Miss Ames was a stiff old prune with a tiresome practice of preaching! Nothing Miss Ames preached about could be important enough to remember afterwards. But, notwithstanding her reluctance, the germ of Miss Ames' preachment persisted. "You are at the most beautiful age of girlhood, budding into the lovely promise of womanhood." "Chicken-feathers!" Theo snorted, but she raised on her elbow and threw a sheepish speculative glance over her prone figure. It was long and lanky under the scant flannel dress

which had served Susan for several winters and which was faded from repeated washings.

"Humph," she grunted, sinking back to her former position, "a skinny thing like you—you got a lot of promise, you have!"

But Miss Ames hadn't meant the snub-nosed, freckled-faced, overgrown outside of her, of course. It was something inside—Jard could explain that as he'd explained to her how God was in the sunsets and the stars and the trees and the birds. Jard even had said, magnificently, that God was in *her*. It had made Theo feel a little queer at the moment but she had accepted it, because Jard said it was so. Of course, she'd reasoned, God was in the part of her which she felt with; He'd scarcely abide in any other region. And it was that feeling part, of course, that would blossom, as Miss Ames had said ——

Theo sat up and clasped her knees, a shining glow coming to her face. It would be nice to unfold, like the apple blossoms, and grow and be beautiful! Maybe if the inside of her grew like that the outside of her would take on some beauty. And both would burst on her family and her schoolmates and—her teachers, with all the wonder of a summer sunrise!

Her family had various names for her. Dad called her his "scamp" and his "gypsy," Susan, her older sister, called her a nuisance, Petunia Slaght, who kept house for them, designated her more elaborately. "I never knew a young one like you to get into every-

thing." Jard called her "kid." Miss Ames had said she was lamentable, deplorable—and a problem.

She'd never worried very much about what any of them had called her; she had been satisfied that Dad and Petunia and Jard loved her, even Susan at times, and no one cared about Miss Ames, but, now, contemplating a possible blossoming, she thought that maybe they'd love her *more* if she were different!

It was a very big and altogether engaging thought and had an element of excitement about it, when one could detach it from Miss Ames. Theo speculated on it with an inner, half-shy ecstasy. She didn't want to be exactly like Susan, who was afraid of water and couldn't bat a ball and spent most of her time when at home sitting in the swing in the backyard with a book, or worse, with Hank Peters, but she might begin by being *something* like her—she could use Susan as a pattern until she found another more perfect. She'd study more and she wouldn't shout around the house "enough to deafen a person," as Petunia so frequently told her, and she'd keep her room in order and she wouldn't tear her clothes, if she could help it—she'd ask Dad if she couldn't have some brand new clothes, sort of like Susan's, for it would be easier to remember not to climb everything in sight if she had on a pretty dress. And she'd think and think of the beauty of blossoming *inside* of her, for,

of course, a pretty dress in itself couldn't bring that about—though, Theo reasoned, it would help.

She thought she felt a change already. Certainly she felt a little funny, the way she had when Jard'd talked about God inside of her, a sort of lifted, good feeling. If she only could tell Jard what she was going to do—but if she told him he wouldn't be surprised when all of a sudden he realized that Theodate Waring was blossoming into the lovely promise of womanhood. She drew herself erect and lifted her arms up over her head until they nearly touched the lowest of the apple boughs, lifted them slowly and, she felt, gracefully, as a sign of her resolution.

And just then loud voices broke her beautiful spell. Theo saw Joe Brace and a chum approaching, fish-poles over their shoulders. In a twinkling her exalted mood vanished. She was all fury and hatred. Joe's taunts beat in her ears. "Your Percy-boy." He'd called Jard *that*. "A yellow sap!"

She went hot and tingly. Her thin body which a moment before had felt uplifted with "promise" was taut with wary purpose. She waited, scarcely breathing, until the boys came abreast of her position. Now, now was the moment to make Joe Brace eat what he'd said, for there was no Miss Ames to stop her.

The boys had not seen her. With the swiftness of a cat she sprang out into the road and confronted them.

"You take back what you said about Jard, Joe Brace. You do it now. Right now."

Startled, Joe Brace retreated a step or two.

"Say it, Joe Brace. Say that you were lying."

"I wasn't lying!" Joe growled, shifting his eyes from Theo's blazing face. Which was poor technique on Joe's part, for, like an avenging wrath embodied with nimble legs and wiry arms the girl was at him. One clenched brown fist shot out and clipped Joe under the chin. Joe staggered back, mouthing an ugly word, then lunged heavily at Theo, to strike only air and pitch forward ignominiously to the ground.

"You'll hear from this, Theo Waring," Joe's companion was threatening from a discreet distance.

"Huh, he can't fight anyone his own size—even a girl." Theo stood over her victim, every muscle twitching. "Say you were lying, Joe Brace. It's—it's your last chance. Get up on your legs ——"

"I'll get even with you, you—you—she cat!" Joe mumbled, wiping his mouth with a dusty sleeve.

"Get up on your legs and fight, then," Theo demanded hotly. It was against her principles of combat to strike a foe who was down, though her arms and her feet itched to get at him. "Get up ——"

But Joe had no opportunity to get up, even if he had any such inclination. At that instant an automobile swiftly rounded the curve in the road and, with a grinding protest of brakes, stopped, almost

upon them. A woman in the tonneau of the car screamed hysterically.

"Did we kill someone, Geoffrey?" She leaned out of the car. "Did we hit him? Who did?"

The chauffeur and a girl had sprung out of the car, ignoring the shrill outcry of the other passenger.

"What's happened?" the chauffeur demanded, looking first at Joe who was scrambling to his feet, his face red and sullen, and then at Theo.

"Nothing," Theo answered shortly. She resented this unexpected interference. Joe and his companion were sidling away. "It's just a fight."

The chauffeur looked more sharply at Theo and laughed. And the girl, standing behind the chauffeur, stared. But she did not laugh.

"Well, if it's only a fight—suppose you clear the road and let us pass." The man turned back to the car.

But the woman in the car put in a voice. "Fighting? Who's fighting? Disgraceful—what sort of people live in this place. Beth, get into the car at once."

Joe had recovered his fishpole and he and his companion with threatening grimaces at Theo, which she did not see, slunk away. Theo stepped to the edge of the road, her cheeks hot. Did that silly, shrieking creature in the car think she'd hurt her precious Beth? She had repeated her command to the girl to get into the car at once.

"Oh, mamma, please be quiet. It's no concern of ours," Beth answered. She went back to the car, stepping carefully to guard her pale tan shoes from the dust.

"Geoffrey," she said to the chauffeur. "Ask her if this road takes us to Merridam."

CHAPTER III

THE Waring house, like its neighbors, was down at the heels and weatherbeaten but it was roomy and set well back from the road and sheltered by sprawling poplars. Warings had lived in it for generations and the men of three generations had been doctors, beginning with Elijah Waring who knew all the secrets of herbs and rode around the country-side on a bony roan, healing with his potions. John Waring, Theo's father, had gone to a medical college in Boston and served for three years in a big city hospital after which he had come back to follow in his father's and grandfather's country practice, except that he drove a ramshackle Ford where they had gone about in buggies and on horseback. When progressive Merridamites urged him to keep in step with the growth of the village and move across the river he had shaken his head, laughingly. Why, he might just as well try to transplant one of the big trees!

When Susan urged him to move he answered her in the same way. Leave his garden with its roses and syringas and phlox and canterbury bells that had grown there since he was a little shaver and maybe a long time before that? Never. Leave his shabby

study with its narrow shelves of old books and its carpet, worn in a path where he'd walked down his hard cases? He couldn't think, anywhere else.

Of course it was the shabby study and the old-fashioned garden Susan deplored. She sighed with envy for one of the brand-new stucco houses Martin Brace built on the "other side" and sold even before they were completed. If it had a nice shiny shingle affixed to it, with "Dr. John Waring" painted on it, Dad would seem more like a real doctor! Then if Dad would get a new car and a new suit of clothes ——

Theo never was bothered with such longings. She loved the old house—just as it was. It offered endless opportunities for games, from its dusty, cobwebby attic to its cellar, mysteriously dark and odorous and approached by steep, stone steps. Where was there a house in new Merridam that had trees one could climb and a garden wall and an old well where one could hide securely, if at considerable hazard—she might have answered Susan if she'd bothered to answer her at all. Theo classed Susan's grumblings all in a piece with her silly, grown-up ways.

Petunia Slaght loved the old house, too. Petunia ruled over it and took care of everything, from the front yard over which she occasionally ran a lawn-mower, to the garden which she occasionally weeded. She took more steps than she could count sweeping and dusting the big rooms and cooking and washing

and ironing but she never complained or wished that the Doctor would move into a smaller, newer house on the other side where the work would be easier. Like the doctor, her roots were too deep to transplant. Hers were in her affection for what belonged to John Waring. She had come to work for his mother when she was fifteen. She had stayed on after his mother died and after John Waring brought a young bride to the old house. She had cradled Susan in her arms and five years later Jard and then Theo. She had looked to John Waring's needs with clumsy tenderness during his grief following his wife's death. She had mended and made dresses and made them over for Susan and Theo and nursed Theo through every childish ailment which she picked up "same's she picked up burrs."

She was over fifty now, tall, bony, flat-chested, with large capable hands and feet, and a single purpose in life. To serve John Waring.

She was in the kitchen preparing supper when Theo came in. The clock pointed to a quarter of six, but it was not unusual for Theo to come home from school at that hour and Petunia did not look sharply at her for that reason. It was the expression on Theo's face that held her eye.

"You look peaked, child. I thought all those pancakes you et this morning would rise up and smite you."

Theo ignored her solicitation. "Where's Jard?" she asked, out of habit.

"He's gone with the doctor out to old Mis' Cobbs. She's took again with her asthmy," Petunia said a little scornfully. "Be a good thing if she died, the times she's kept your pa running out there. Only she'd be mad as a setting hen if she did, for then she couldn't squabble with her sister-in-law over who'd have the quilt her ma pieced. It'd be settled ——"

Theo ignored that, too. She helped herself to one of the cookies on a platter on the table and sat down to eat it.

She twisted her feet around the legs of the chair, slumping down into it until her weight rested on the middle of her spine. She regarded the familiar kitchen with mournful eyes, not seeing it so much as a mental vision of her afternoon. Even her retaliation on Joe Brace had no pleasant aftertaste, for she had not made him take back what he'd called Jard and, too, it was overshadowed by a stinging resentment. The way that woman in the car had called her precious Beth back to her, as if she might be contaminated! And she suffered more than resentment—that ill-timed encounter on the road had not been so brief but that Theo had caught an impression of this Beth as the prettiest girl she ever had seen! Obviously, to judge by the signs of creamy skin and straight nose, long lashes veiling the bluest of blue eyes, trim beige suit with beige shoes to match, with higher

heels than Susan ever wore, this Beth had "blossomed." And this conviction steeped poor Theo in black discouragement.

These strangers were seeking Merridam as a destination. In that case she might see this perfect Beth again and again, to her further humiliation.

"Do you know anyone 'round here who's expecting very grand company?" she asked Petunia, after a heavy silence. Petunia belonged to the Maccabees which met on the other side, over the new Post-office, and she attended meetings regularly each week, returning to Dr. Waring's with all the gossip of the town.

"Ida Cass' married daughter's coming home ——" Petunia offered. But Theo sniffed. "Oh—I mean someone *terribly* grand." She described the car—as she remembered it. "There was a girl ——" But she could not find the words to do justice to Beth's elegance.

Petunia put down a dish with a little excitement. "I believe it's the folks who've taken the Bunting place! He's bought the old brickyard. Sara Peters was talking about 'em, last meeting night. Bradford's the name. There's been carpenters working in the house this long while and boxes as big as pianos coming. Where'd you see them?"

Theo answered cautiously. "Oh—they stopped and asked me something." She was almost as excited as Petunia, but for different reasons. If those people

were the Bradfords—then she *was* likely to meet Beth innumerable times. That was certain. The fact that the Warings lived in old Merridam and the Bunting house was the show place of new Merridam was no protection. As Susan often said, to comfort herself: "We're invited everywhere even if we do live in this ancient dump."

Theo having finished her cookie and seen Petunia put the platter out of her reach, went out to the garden to wait for supper and Jard and Dad and Susan. Susan worked now in the village library and, like Petunia, brought back each evening various bits of news she had gleaned from her patrons. Usually Theo gave scant attention to what Susan held important enough to retell, but tonight she waited with a little apprehension. Susan might know if those people were the Bradfords.

"Anyway, a lot I care!" She swung idly, trying to feel grandly indifferent to that slender elegant creature who persisted in her thought. If Susan spoke of them—the car had to pass the library and Susan didn't miss anything that passed the window—she wouldn't listen.

After a while she heard Susan talking to Petunia. She'd come home. But she wasn't likely to come out into the garden for Susan had a foolish practice of changing her work dress for another every evening before supper. "Dolling up," Theo called it scornfully. She knew Susan did it because she always

hoped to have "company," later. A part of her wanted to run in and ask Susan if she'd seen a big car with a girl in it—and another part clung doggedly to the wooden supports of the old swing.

Then Dad and Jard drove in, in the old Ford. When she ran to meet them, Dad caught her in his arms in a big hug. That was always his greeting even after the briefest separation. But now Theo wriggled a little impatiently from his clasp. "Supper's ready and I'm *starved.*" What she really felt was an impatience to hear what she dreaded to hear.

Supper time was the nicest part of the day for Theo. Petunia always cooked such good things for supper. And it wasn't like breakfast which you had to hurry through so as not to be late for school—at least, *very* late. You could sit at the table and eat as much and as long as you wanted to. Even Dad felt that way. Dad was always smiling in an extra jolly way as if for the time being he'd forgotten all the folks who were sick. The dining-room was the pleasantest room in the house, winter and summer. In the winter the old hanging-lamp shed a golden pool over the table and in the spring and summer the low sun streamed in through the west windows, touching the wide room with a sort of soft magic.

But tonight Theo took her place next to Dad with an unsmiling face. Susan was still dressing; she could hear her heels tap-tapping upstairs. Dad was telling

Petunia, laughingly, that Mrs. Cobb was far from dead and Jard was telling Theo that he'd heard a woodthrush in the woods next to the Cobb farm—the first one of the season. He was a tall, thin lad, with curiously wistful eyes and a wide sensitive mouth. He half-whispered his news to Theo as if he didn't want anyone else to hear. These little confidences always made Theo swell with pride and affection. But now she felt only a deeper anger at Joe Brace who had sneered at Jard—singing to the birds, tra-la!

Then Susan came in, in her best print silk dress with the little lace collar. She slipped into her chair with a pretty apology for her tardiness. "Oh, no, Dad, no potatoes, *please!*" she cried, in faint horror. Petunia, hovering between Dr. Waring's chair and the kitchen door, sniffed audibly: "You're thin enough now to blow way in a strong wind."

From a corner of her eye Theo looked anxiously at Susan, but it was not her slimness that concerned her! Certainly Susan appeared more excited than any expectation of company warranted. "Dad, those new people have come," she said, even before she took a mouthful of food. "You know—the ones who've taken the Bunting house. The Bradfords. Mr. Bradford's bought the old brick-yards. They say he's going to start a pottery place—make some sort of fancy dishes."

Theo gulped. She felt an uncomfortable warmth about her neck.

"I saw them when they went by the library," Susan went on, importantly. "You should have seen the car —it's bigger than Martin Brace's and a chauffeur. And Molly Stevens came in just as I was closing up and told me all about them. Her cousin Carrie Tubbs has been helping get the house ready. They're bringing servants with them from New York—a bunch of them. And they've sent on the swellest furniture. Gilt chairs with pink satin cushions and a rug that's all pink to match and crystal chandeliers and an *enormous* dining-room table. It seems they've lived a long time in Europe—Mrs. Bradford isn't well. That's why they've come here. The doctor says she must be where it is quiet. Molly saw them getting out of the car—the girl is *beautiful*, Molly says."

"I wish, Dad," Susan finished, with a doleful diminuendo in her voice, "that you'd get to know Mr. Bradford."

"Well, it isn't likely they'll be interested in a country doctor like me, Susan," Dr. Waring laughed at his older daughter over the rim of his tea cup. He liked to tease Susan by speaking of himself in that way.

"If we lived on the other side——" she began, her old grievance stirring afresh, "you'd be as good as anybody else."

"He'd be better," Theo would have cried at any

other time. "He'd be better no matter *where* he lived." But now she was too deep in her own misery to heed the challenge. *She* didn't hope Dad ever would know this Mr. Bradford!

Her father observed her preoccupation. "Why is my scamp so quiet, tonight?"

"I've got to write my English theme over again," Theo groaned, flushing under the necessity of evading her father's question.

"Is that reason enough for such a cloudy face? Are you sure you have nothing else on your conscience?" He pinched her cheek.

The color crept to the roots of Theo's untidy hair. "You'd say it was enough if you'd heard Miss Ames bawl me out."

Though she looked at neither her father nor Jard she was perfectly aware of a little surprise on their faces. With something of a shock she realized that she was giving them the impression that she *cared* that Miss Ames had bawled her out. And she didn't. But she couldn't retract her statement. She rose from the table a little hastily and walked out of the room.

She heard Petunia say: "She et too many pancakes this morning, doctor, and et them like the devil himself was after her to grab 'em away."

In her own room Theo sat down at the little table she used as a desk. She spread some pad paper before her as if to make herself believe she really was going to write the old English theme. From the table,

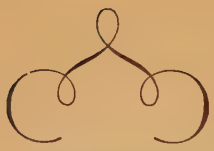
set next to the window, she stared sadly out across the yard. On any other evening she would have coaxed Jard into a game of "toss" or some other equally engaging pastime, or maybe a walk into the woods, which, at twilight, and with Jard, always seemed different and mysterious and full of new wonders.

She heard the telephone ring and Petunia's voice. "It's for you, Doctor." Petunia always resented any call on the doctor at any time of the day. "He works just like a slave, he does," was her frequent remark.

"I'll run over at once," Theo heard her father say.

He always said just that but in Theo's present mood even familiar words held new and alarming significance. Run—where?

"Susan! Susan!" Dad called, a sound of laughing in his voice. "Want to ride with me? The country doctor's been summoned to give your grand Mrs. Bradford some quieting medicine."



CHAPTER IV

ORDINARILY Theo wakened to every new day with a sense of adventure. Winter or summer, rain or shine made no difference—each held its own attraction. Saturdays and Sundays and holidays of course were nicer than other days, but even the tedium of school could not oppress her immediately. She always dashed into her clothes, singing lustily, raced down the stairs shouting out to Jard that she'd beat him to the table. She ate ravenously and much.

But the morning following her encounter with the Bradfords had no allure. She'd gone to sleep telling herself that she despised Beth Bradford, and having determined on that and said it aloud several times her mind should have been swept clear of all her disquiet. But it was with her just the same, when she awakened, exactly as if it had been sitting there on her pillow waiting for her to open her eyes.

Susan. Last night. She'd burst in radiant. The Bradfords were perfectly darling people! (Susan's voice had squeaked in her excitement.) They didn't put on airs, at all. Mr. Bradford had sent a maid out to the car to tell Susan to come in. She'd talked with Beth. Beth was only sixteen, though—"put her next to you, Theo, and she'd pass for lots older."

Beth had been—*sweet.* (Another squeak.) And Dad had visited quite awhile with Mr. Bradford after he'd come downstairs from Mrs. Bradford's room. And: "Theo, they're going to have us over just as soon as they're settled. Mr. Bradford said he wanted Beth to know some young people."

"Not *me,*" Theo had thought savagely. She had told Susan, "for goodness' sake stop raving, so's I can finish my home work." And Susan had gone off huffily, with a parting shot: "You'd better acquire some manners before you meet the Bradfords."

Little wonder just saying that she hated Beth Bradford hadn't settled the score!

She ate so little breakfast that Petunia eyed her with her "castor-oil" look. She set out for school with Jard in an uncomfortable silence.

She observed, with relief, that Jard was having a "spell." Petunia had given that name long ago to Jard's varying moods which sometimes were nice, when his face glowed, and other times not so nice, when he scowled and drew his lips in at the corners. Whatever the quality of his mood, he always seemed withdrawn into himself during them, nursing secret thoughts. When he was little, Petunia, more than once, had averred that he ought to be trounced out of them, that it was nothing less than spooky the way he didn't seem to hear you even when you talked right at him, let alone mind what you told him to do, but Dr. Waring, not holding much with trouncings,

had told her to leave the child alone. "We all have a right to some peculiarities," he had laughed.

Theo always had respected Jard's "spells," even the black ones. She believed loyally that under the blackest of them he was still thinking what she called "beautiful" thoughts. She had been content to wait until he came out from his absorption, usually feeling a little excitement and pride that Jard was different from other folks.

Though Jard was over a year older than Theo there had been always a watchful protectiveness in her devotion to her brother. Jard had been sickly as a little boy and Theo, hearing Dad and Petunia talk about him, had known a fear beyond her years. Jakie Heisenbottle was "puny" and he'd died and maybe Jard might die, too. Petunia always spoke of him as "puny." And once she had asked Dad if Jard might die, like Jakie Heisenbottle. Dad had laughed. "Not if you keep him out in the sunshine with you." That had seemed like a charge and Theo had lived up to it, making of herself a slave to Jard's whims and at the same time exercising a maternal concern for his well-being.

And through this close companionship she had come to know that he hated rough games, even good-natured squabbling, that risk of any sort gave him an inner queasiness that made him actually sick, that he suffered from painful shyness before strangers, and

she shielded him from all this. "Oh, come on, Jard, let's not do that."

She had felt no jealousy for Phil Clapp or Don Pearson who were Jard's only chums at school, for she knew Jard didn't tell them all the things he told her. "Now don't you tell anyone I said that, kid. Don't you tell a soul!" Jard had said so frequently that Theo knew she held first place with him. When as they grew older Jard laughed at some of their favorite pastimes: "Say, you'll be asking me to play dolls, next!" she had felt no jealousy but had quite simply fitted her own inclinations to his.

But now walking along the familiar way to school, over which she and Jard had walked together for years, she felt a heaviness on her heart that was worse than jealousy. She couldn't tell Jard anything about how or why she hated this Beth Bradford because to tell him meant telling him that Joe Brace had called him a "sissy" and she'd cut her tongue out of her mouth before she'd tell him *that*. It was the very first thing she had not been able to talk over with Jard, for, though she'd planned to keep her resolution of "blossoming" a secret, she'd meant only to keep it a secret for a little while, to be shared when Jard was aware of a change in her. That there should be anything she could not tell Jard gave her an alarming foreboding of separation.

When they reached the schoolhouse she muttered a casual: "See you later," and turned toward the girls'

door. She offered none of her usual suggestions for the afternoon.

She met her schoolmates, hung up her wraps, climbed the stairs to her study room and took her seat. The first class was called. Algebra. Theo sat through it unheeding. A vacant period followed when Theo should have been studying Latin; instead she speculated gloomily on how she would get out of going to the Bradfords—when they invited them. Of course she wouldn't go! The English and Latin and History classes followed in their order, the luncheon hour, and the gymnasium period—but through all of them Theo sat remote. Even the lunch Petunia had packed for her had no pleasant flavor.

When school was dismissed she hurried across the bridge to old Merridam—no loitering now, in the hope that Jard would overtake her!

As she approached her own home she spied a car in the road in front of the house. It was not the gray and gleaming perfection of the Bradfords' car; it gleamed, to be sure, but with brilliant green —— It was Martin Brace's automobile, which, until the coming of the Bradfords, had been the most splendid and expensive car in the community. Martin Brace's car in front of their house! She stopped short. It meant of course—Martin Brace hadn't come to see Dad for any *ailment*. *He* patronized the young doctor whose office was on the new Merridam side.

This was a development Theo had not counted on.

Her brows drew together in a deep scowl. Now Dad would know! Not that she minded that in itself—Dad was bound to laugh when she told him how funny Joe Brace had looked, sprawled in the road. Dad didn't think much of any of the Braces for she'd heard him say that Martin Brace was a "bag of wind." But, after all, that wasn't *anyone's* affair but her own—not even Dad's.

Probably they were in Dad's study. She went cautiously around the house to the outside door that let into the study. She crept up to it, close to the wall. If—if she sat on the step she could hear through the cracks. Martin Brace always bellowed!

He was bellowing now. Theo hadn't intended eavesdropping, only listening long enough to know if Martin Brace were talking about sickness or—about her. But what she heard held her glued to the step.

"It's a disgrace to the community—I ought a have the sheriff on such goings-on."

"Now—now, Brace ——" from Dad.

"Swearin'—and cursin'! We all know what her kind'll grow to if she ain't taken in hand pretty soon ——"

"You great, big liar ——" breathed Theo. She pressed her ear to the door to hear Dad's answer.

"I am perfectly capable of handling my children, Brace ——"

"Mebbe so but why don't you do it, then? I'll say just this, Doc, you make that girl of yours apologize

to my Joe and I'll let the matter drop and if she don't—well, the whole town's goin' to know about it and about what she is though I guess they know pretty much now for there's a lot of talkin' the way she runs loose—a girl her age. That's what I say and that's *all.*" There was a loud thump as if Martin Brace had pounded his fist on the doctor's desk to emphasize his intentions.

It seemed to Theo an interminable time before Dad answered—so long that her breath hurt in her throat. Then: "I don't think I can ask Theo to apologize. That is something she must do of her own free will."

"Hoo-ray!" Theo almost shouted it. She fled to the back of the house. She was trembling with mingled rage and exultation. "That great big blow-wind! As if I'd apologize to Joe Brace!"

She hid in the shelter of a giant syringa bush until she heard Martin Brace's car start away with a mighty roaring. Then she tip-toed back to the study door and boldly opened it.

CHAPTER V

DR. WARING'S study looked something like the doctor, himself, a little shabby but jolly and comfortable, lacking in any professional gleam of nickel and white enamel, smelling more of tobacco than medicines, yet somehow restful and reassuring. The books scattered over the shelves were not all medical books—there were detective stories and others—Nicholas Nickleby and The Tale of Two Cities, The Three Musketeers, Jane Eyre, innumerable contemporaries—all mixed in with thick volumes on diseases of the ear and stomach and such. These pleasanter books were not always on the shelves for, sometimes, starting on a case, John Waring tucked one of them in his shabby old bag to leave with a patient. "It'll make him forget his aches and pains and that he hasn't got his corn in yet ——" he'd say aloud to himself with a little chuckle.

It had been twenty-five years since John Waring had come back to Merridam from the New York hospital. In those twenty-five years he had not been entirely blind to the advantages the "other side" of the river might offer. More money, certainly, more opportunity to develop the skill and quick diagnosis which he had exhibited in his hospital work, a chance

to move shoulder to shoulder with the progress of the community. But even seeing these opportunities he had not been tempted to make any change. Money meant to him only the wherewithal to meet the actual necessities of life. He was content to watch Merridam's progress from a distance, and sometimes with a twinkle in his eyes. He put the comfort of the familiar old house and its friendly ghosts before the excitement of competition. "You're too easy-going, Doc," Everett Sims, the president of the new Merridam Bank and an old schoolmate of John Waring's had said to him once. Well, maybe he was—if the way he stuck to his rut looked like that. But there was a deeper sense under his contentment. He didn't see his country practice particularly easy-going. And to desert it for the growing village across the river seemed like a betrayal of the trust these hard-working, poor farmers put in him. It seemed a betrayal of the service his father and grandfather had given before him and handed down to him. Maybe he was something of a joke, now—traipsing around the county. He was perfectly aware that his colleagues wouldn't do it, that a practice such as his was out of date, that few professional men would go into farm houses and perform the tasks of nurse, housewife and medical advisor for some woman stricken to helplessness. He knew that often he was called for no ailment other than sheer bleak discouragement or loneliness, eating so into the soul as to cause actual

physical pain—but, knowing, he left a quality of cheer behind him as well as harmless pink pills, to be taken every hour, and sometimes a book, and went away without even a grudging thought.

His wife had shared his feeling about his practice. She'd been proud of it. Together they'd talked of having a son to go on with it in his generation. "He may be the last country doctor on record," but they'd agreed that there'd be considerable distinction in that. And when Jard was a baby they'd called him the young Dr. Waring, hanging over his cradle, laughing at the diminutive little creature who was to carry on after John Waring.

Millicent Waring's death, when Theo was a few months old, had checked his dreaming only for that interval of grief when all his world seemed buried in her grave. Gradually time and the familiar round of living had blunted the edge of his sharp loneliness, he had roused to his old satisfaction in his work and in his books and his garden. Petunia managed his house and mothered his children and looked to his comfort.

He had watched his children grow like his flowers, with an indulgent and affectionate pride and no concern; Susan, like her mother in face, a pretty graduate in her white organdy dress and her soft hair curling around her face, Susan, at the library importantly hunting out books and stamping them with the date and cataloging new ones—yet Susan was still to him

the little girl dogging Petunia's footsteps, begging to "cook something." Jard, quiet and sensitive with his strange, wistful eyes, Jard was always the little son around whom he and Millicent had built the stuff of their dreams. And black-eyed Theo, his "scamp," long-legged, tirelessly active, always disheveled of hair and torn of garment, his baby. Give these youngsters food and sunshine, laugh at them, kiss away their little bruises—that had been John Waring's exercise of his parental job. Until now ——

He was reaching for his pipe where it lay on his desk when Theo burst in. A familiar gesture which might have reassured Theo had she needed reassurance. She didn't. Her eyes were bright with laughter ready to meet the laughter in Dad's.

But when Dad turned she sobered. For Dad wasn't laughing. His forehead was puckered with anxious, perplexed wrinkles.

"Well—Theo!" He put the pipe down.

She perched herself on the arm of his chair and dug her nose into his thick gray hair.

"I heard—what that man said. It was a lie—at least that part about my swearing."

"Oh, you heard, then?" But Dad didn't chuckle. He did not put his arm around her to hold her securely on her insecure seat. "Tell me about it," he said.

"Well, it began like this ——" In faithful detail Theo told of her interference in Charles Parker's

behalf. "And then he called Jard a sissy, Dad." Her tone warmed to her rising indignation. "And I told him he'd got to take it back." Then of Miss Ames coming on. And what had happened on the road. She ended with a vivid description of Joe toppling over. "He wasn't hurt a bit but mad as anything because I dodged him." And that was all there was to it. She did not tell of Beth Bradford's appearance.

Next to Jard Dad was the most understanding person in the world. He wouldn't fail her, now, of course, she thought, waiting, wondering why Dad didn't say something—didn't laugh.

After a moment he put her gently away from him. "Sit there, Theo." He indicated the chair Martin Brace must have pulled up close to the desk. Then he looked at her so long that Theo grew uneasy and glanced down to see if there was anything strange in her appearance to hold Dad's attention in such a way.

"Maybe the fellow's right—Susan's said just about the same thing, too. I've let you run loose. It's—my fault, I suppose."

Theo shrank in astonishment and alarm from the look on Dad's face—it was such a sorry look. And so perplexed.

He took her hand and turned it over. "I don't like to think that it ever touched a Brace," he said with a sharp distaste in his voice.

Theo drew her hand away. "I—I did it for Jard." That seemed convincing defense.

The doctor shook his head with a laugh that had no mirth in it. "That's how I've failed you, child! If you can't see, at your age, that it really didn't *help* Jard, any, that anything Joe Brace called him couldn't hurt him."

Theo's mind went back, with a sharp tug.

"Joe Brace said Jard was a—was a coward!"

"He did, did he?"

"That's what I meant—that he had to take *that* back."

Dr. Waring rose so quickly that the swivel chair almost tipped over. He began to pace the little path in the carpet, his hands in his hair. "Now," thought Theo, relieved, "Dad's mad, too. He won't blame me for hitting Joe Brace."

But her relief was short-lived. For Dad turned, fairly glaring at her.

"You can't go around fighting Jard's battles for him. He's got to do that for himself. He's got to show what sort of stuff's in him." He came and halted in front of her, scanning her from head to toe, as he had before. "Why, your clothes don't seem right, not for a big girl like you. Susan'll have to fix you up with some."

Theo felt as if the familiar floor were slipping away from under her. She'd never heard Dad speak of her clothes before—not like that. Petunia always

had seen that she was dressed according to what Petunia held proper and what Susan had outgrown. Susan bought her own clothes out of her allowance, augmented now by her small earnings at the library. A brand new dress, hers in every process of it from the moment the material was measured off at the store would be exciting, indeed, had been a part of that beautiful inspiration under the apple blossoms, but now it offered no thrill, for she'd lost the inspiration and she didn't think Dad meant exactly clothes, alone.

Dr. Waring dropped into his chair with a long sigh. "I suppose I've got to take you in hand. I've been forgetting that the years are passing. I'll have a talk with Susan ——"

That and the uncertainty in her father's voice struck a strange chill to Theo's heart. He had picked up his pipe which he had put down at her coming and was drawing on it—and it wasn't lighted. His forehead was still puckered and he looked as if he'd forgotten she was there.

She moved awkwardly towards the door, pausing there a moment, half-hoping Dad would call her back. But he didn't—he was still drawing on his pipe, making funny little sucking sounds.

CHAPTER VI

THEO went up to her room. She had no desire, in her disturbed state of mind, to encounter Petunia's boring eye.

Her room was in the back wing, over the kitchen. It was low-ceiled with pleasant windows, perpetually untidy, for long since Petunia had "sworn off" giving it anything but its Thursday sweeping and dusting. Its chaos never disturbed Theo; as long as she could dig her way at night into her little bed and, if she'd left them in a pile on the floor by her bed, dash into her clothes in the morning, she didn't notice it.

Now she stood irresolutely in the middle of the floor, bewildered—vaguely hurt. Her world which until now had swung so smoothly that she never had had to take stock of it had turned upside down. Possibilities loomed, alarming because she did not know to what they might lead.

And it was all so silly! Why, hitting Joe Brace hadn't been anything, considering what he'd said. She could not understand why Dad had acted so serious about it, and so sad, and talked, as Martin Brace had, about letting her run loose. And now Dad was going to take her in hand. Worse, he was

going to ask Susan to help him. Indeed, all that that could mean might be infinitely worse even than apologizing to Joe Brace, which would be humiliating and a lie, because she wasn't sorry she'd done it.

She began, mechanically, hanging away the clothes she'd thrown on a chair three days ago. She did not do it from any sudden desire for order but merely because she had to do something. Perhaps instinctively she saw the untidiness of her room as further damaging evidence against her. She gathered up bits of paper from the floor where she'd been cutting out pictures for her scrap book. She kicked an empty box under her bureau and crammed the litter on top of the bureau into one of the drawers.

Petunia, hearing her, called loudly: "That you, Theo? What're you doin' up there?" And Theo answered: "Oh, hunting for something."

Petunia had to call her to supper. "Land sakes, what's took the child? She's been up there in her room all afternoon," Theo heard her say.

She had changed her school dress, putting on her second best. She wasn't going to have Dad looking over her again, as if there was something funny about her!

The moment she entered the room she felt Susan's eyes on her. *She* knew, then.

"I shouldn't think Dad would let you *have* any supper!" Susan burst forth at once, her voice full of

tears. "Everyone who came into the library this afternoon 'd heard about it. Miss Parrott, from school, and Annie Pratt and Mrs. Dorrance—they all acted as if they felt sorry for me, that I had such a sister! The Braces are telling everyone in this town ——" She dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief.

"Susan!" Dad's voice was sober. "It isn't going to help matters crying. We'll talk this thing out."

"What's happened now?" demanded Petunia, holding a dish of apple sauce suspended over the table.

"Happened—Theo's disgraced us! Fighting—like any tough boy."

"*Fighting?* Who'd she fight?"

There was no holding back the tide.

"Joe Brace. And they're the worst gossips in this town."

"Well I hope she gave him something he'll feel though if you ask me I'll say the Braces are too thick-skinned to feel *any*thing. What'd she fight him for?" Petunia sat down in a chair, the dish of apple sauce clutched tightly in her hands.

"Oh, I don't know," Susan half-sobbed in utter exasperation. The cause had not concerned her.

Theo sat taut—scarcely breathing. Would Dad tell? Petunia was looking at her, expectantly. "He called names—I didn't like," she muttered.

"Well, if you ask me I'll say him and his folks

are calling you worse ones now. A girl your age. A girl of John Waring's ——"

John Waring broke in. "That's enough," he said with a sharp authority in his voice quite new. "I don't think Theo will do it again. Susan, I want you to ride over to Forest Creek with me after supper." He didn't even ask her if she would. He put it like a command, and commands were so rare on John Waring's lips that even Petunia jumped up and put the apple sauce dish quickly on the table, for fear John Waring might be after her, next.

Theo could not eat. "I guess I don't want any supper," she mumbled, rising hastily from her chair. But she didn't want Susan to know how she felt inside so she tossed her head and kept it at a stiff angle until she was out of the room.

After a while she heard the Ford go out of the yard. She listened until its chug-chug died away in the distance, a cold resentment shivering through her. It wasn't fair! Dad and Susan were going to plan things for her—clothes and things, and she couldn't say a word.

Jard's voice, answering Petunia's from the side porch, roused her out of her unhappy reflections. She ran out of her hiding-place, calling to him. With Jard everything would be all right and as it had been. Jard would understand. Like herself Jard would think the fuss Dad and Susan were making was silly and out of all proportion to what she'd

done. Her step was light and her heart suddenly buoyant.

But at one glance at Jard's face her reassurance died and dismay and bewilderment flooded over her again. It had its tight-up look and his eyes were angry. And now their anger was for her, leveled on her.

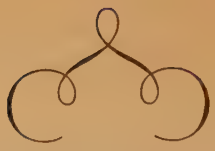
"What'd you go and do a thing like that for?" he demanded harshly.

"Jard ——" she pleaded, winking fast to keep the tears out of her eyes.

"Do you think it's very pleasant hearing Joe Brace's crowd whispering things about you at school? Well, it isn't."

"Jard ——"

But he would not listen. He strode past her toward the barn. He did not even tell her what he was going to do.



CHAPTER VII

MATILDA MAPLE was at the house sewing. Petunia had brought the sewing machine into the dining-room and the big table was covered with pieces of patterns and lengths of pretty cloth.

Petunia was cleaning the parlor—as though she hadn't cleaned it earlier in the spring.

Theo watched everything with a stone in her breast where her heart had used to beat so joyously. The new dresses Matilda was making were for her—and she hated them. And the parlor was being cleaned because Susan had invited the Bradfords for tea! And Theo hated that much more.

It was all part of what Dad and Susan had planned, riding over to Forest Creek. Theo could hear Susan: "Theo ought to know some nice girl." And who nicer than Beth Bradford? And she could hear Dad. "Can't you fix her up with some clothes, suitable for her age?"

If Susan had let her pick out the dresses—but she hadn't. She had selected both materials and patterns, and bought one for herself. "While Tilly's here she might as well make me a dress." Oh, yes, of course!

Susan had written a little note to Beth Brad-

ford. Theo'd heard her read it to Dad. The note hadn't sounded a bit as though Susan were ashamed of the old house, as she really was, and Theo's lips had curled scornfully. It had sounded like a lie —that letter. *She* wouldn't write one like that! But Dad's approval had been pleased.

Theo only went near Matilda Maple when she had to have a fitting and then Petunia had to call her twice. "Seems like you've turned deef with everything else," Petunia scolded. And Theo stood very stiff and unsmiling while Matilda put in pins and took them out. Petunia attended each fitting, at the expense of the cleaning, looking like a veritable dragon with a cloth tied around her head and her eyes sternly fixed on Matilda Maple. "She'll skimp the seams if you don't watch her." But Theo knew Petunia watched for other reasons. "She don't carry back anything she's picked up here off'n anything we say."

Theo sensed the little seamstress' avid "pickings."

"Ain't it late to be cleaning, Petunia? I got mine done in March—took a week off from sewin' to do it. Or is it that you're getting slicked up for something special? Susan's not going to get married, is she? Lina Peters says Hank's keeping pretty steady company with Susan, but goodness' sake it don't seem anytime since she was a young one with curls down her back riding along with her pa the doctor. I s'pose

it won't be no time before Theo here will be a young lady with beaus. Look at the height of her!"

"Now, a little ruffle down the front will trim this up pretty. I always say a girl kind of goes through a ruffly age—you know, Petunia, standin' with reluctant feet where womanhood and childhood meet! Yes, I believe I'll tack on a ruffle and see how it looks. And mebbe Susan'd bring home a ribbon for a belt—kind of catch the eye." She winked kittenishly at the grim Petunia. "I've heard ma tell of the 'Follow-me-lads' they used to trim their bonnets with. Yes, a ribbon'd smarten up the dress and ruffle ——"

Theo writhed inwardly with loathing. Her flesh prickled when Matilda's thin fingers touched it. Ruffles! A follow-me-lad on *her!*

"Ain't Theo sort o' backwardish for her age?" she heard the seamstress ask Petunia. "Fifteen, ain't she? Most girls nowadays, come fifteen, all they think of is clothes and the boys and Theo ain't any more excited over havin' a new dress than it was so much potato-sacking. I expect it's the way her pa, the doctor's let her run sort of wild."

No, Theo was not excited in the way Matilda Maple meant. If the pink garment shaping in the seamstress' fingers had been a straight-jacket, she could not have regarded it with more despair. It was symbolical of the overturn of everything comfortably

familiar to her, and of the alarming things to come —like meeting Beth Bradford.

In her whole fifteen years Theo had not shed tears more than half a dozen times. Petunia's "lickings," superficial at their severest, a sprained ankle, the innumerable bruises and cuts of her harum-scarum activities, tooth-aches and stomach-aches, she'd endured with a stoical grit. "That's nothing." Such trials, indeed, had seemed nothing and could be eased instantly by an admiring glance from Jard or old Jasper or, more quickly even, by the feel of her face against her father's shoulder. But the night after Dad and Susan rode off to Forest Creek and Jard denounced her, too, she had wept bitterly into her pillow—it had seemed as though the tears would not stop coming. And they had brought her no relief. She had slept finally from sheer exhaustion but wakened to greater resentment and self-pity. Theo—who never had had to feel sorry for herself before!

In her new sensitiveness she read aversion in Jard's face and steeled herself against it. Let him pretend to have to do things—it didn't matter now. That she'd done what she had defending Jard's honor added a bitter-sweet satisfaction to her self-pity. She read a hidden meaning in Dad's every word and glance, and Susan's, too—even Petunia's. When Dad queried: "How are the new dresses coming on?" peeping under the apron Matilda Maple laid over her sewing every night, and adding: "Folks won't

know you when you appear in all that finery," Theo thought stonily: "He doesn't *want* folks to know me."

Susan's importance was more gall to her spirit. Since the ride to Forest Creek Susan had ordered Theo about with a meaning tone of authority. She ordered Petunia, too, though with a little less command. "I think we'll use the pink and white dishes everyday, Petunia. It's silly, keeping them for best," for one thing.

Plainly Susan regarded the coming of the Bradfords as a turning-point in their lives. "They're the most distinguished people who've ever lived here," she said at one time. "They haven't taken up with *anyone* here." And they had accepted her invitation. Beth, herself, had written a note in answer to Susan's. The chauffeur had left it at the house. They would "*love*" to come over. "It is very kind of you to think of us." Susan read it aloud at the table. (Kind! "Humph!" Theo had snorted to herself.)

"And of course after they've been *here* they'll invite us over there," Susan commented, her eyes bright as they looked ahead to a pleasant intimacy with these distinguished Bradfords. "Now, if Theo'll only *behave* herself ——"

And Theo smarted under the meaning of Susan's words.

The fuss Susan made over the parlor! "Dad, we don't have to keep all those pictures on the wall, do

we?" she had appealed. "Pictures—a lot of them—are dreadfully mid-Victorian. Didn't you notice that the Bradfords didn't have any in their parlor?"

"Why ——" Doctor Waring had answered easily: "Suit yourself, my dear."

So Susan, without ceremony, eliminated the steel engravings of Niagara Falls and George Washington taking his oath of office, the faded but withal terrifying copy of Balthazar's feast which had hung between the front windows and the sheep coming through a lane which Grandmother Waring had painted when she was a girl.

"Don't seem reverent," Petunia had grumbled, carrying the discard up to the attic. "I s'pose them waxed flowers and the Bible itself won't be good enough to stay on the table where they've set for all these years." They were not—Susan banished them next, the waxed flowers to the dining-room cupboard and the Bible to a little table in the corner. She brought some of Dad's books from the study and scattered them with some magazines over the center table. "Now it looks as if we lived in here and didn't just keep this room for funerals," she said, pleased with the effect. She was satisfied with the lamp; old-fashioned lamps were the rage, now. And the old square piano was left undisturbed because it was too heavy to move.

Eventually the dresses were finished, the sewing-machine back in the closet off the hall, the scraps

of cloth and pins and threads cleared from the dining-room floor, the parlor in order, Saturday, the day of the tea party, at hand.

Petunia had hung the new dresses in Theo's closet where Theo, in secret, glared at their prettiness. It was meant to mask the real her—what Dad and Susan and even Jard thought she was. "If Theo *behaves* herself ——"

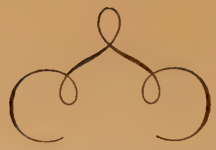
Downstairs Petunia was frosting little sponge cakes. Maple-sugar frosting. The pink and white cups and saucers were spread out on the kitchen table and the white napkins beside the plates. The old silver of the cake dish and the tea service shone to a beautiful luster. A spick and span white apron lay over the back of a kitchen chair waiting to go around Petunia's bony form when the important hour struck. Theo saw it all through the door.

She had prayed the night before that she might be terribly sick—stricken unto death so that, instead of drinking tea with the Bradfords, Dad and Susan and Jard and Petunia would be gathered about her bedside, weeping, remorseful—especially Jard. And her last words—whispered through dry and trembling lips—would be to Jard. "I did—it—for—you." But in spite of her prayers she had gone to sleep and wakened quite well!

Two facts sustained Theo in a small measure. One was that, on meeting the Bradfords today, it must come to light how and where she had met

them before, which would be most mortifying to Susan and must squash Susan's plans for further acquaintance with these fine people! She'd relish Mrs. Bradford squealing: "Why, that's that terrible girl we saw fighting in the road!" How Susan would look *then!* Her other comfort was that Jard must be present and she knew how Jard suffered, meeting strangers. "You'll be home, won't you, Jard?" Susan had said to him that morning, in her "bossy" voice and Theo had seen the distress in Jard's eyes. A few days ago she would have shielded him—but not now!

She turned her back on the sight of Petunia frosting the cakes—and some of the frosting dripping invitingly over the edge of the bowl—and slipped quietly out of the house. She went out to the road. It stretched empty before her—offering escape. She didn't think of it as escape because she had no thought but to face things; her feet carried her along with little will on her part. Then suddenly she decided she'd go to Jasper's.



CHAPTER VIII

BETH BRADFORD ran down the winding stairs of the "Bunting" house and joined her father, waiting on the veranda.

"Well ——" she cried, with a little shrug of her shoulders. "She's decided she'll go—after all. Will we be dreadfully late? I wouldn't like to offend that nice Susan Waring. It *was* nice of her to invite us, wasn't it?" Beth slipped her hand into her father's arm and squeezed it with slim, white fingers.

"Yes—it was nice. I'm glad you're going to know them. The man down at the Bank says Dr. Waring's a good doctor, too—had considerable hospital experience and threw over the chance to make a name in a bigger place for the country practice his father had had before him. That's a rather curious, self-effacing thing to do in this day and age. I'm glad your mother has confidence in him ——"

Beth laughed. "She won't be sending for that awful East Indian, with his cures. I was horribly afraid —when she began talking about him."

Mr. Bradford laughed, too, though it did not smooth the tired lines about his mouth. "I hope she'll forget him, now. I think it's going to do us all good

—living here. Are *you* going to be happy?" He bent a searching glance to her face.

It was a pretty face as it showed under the pale-green malines hat, with its delicate skin, clear blue eyes, straight small nose and sensitive lips. But Dalton Bradford's brows drew together in a little frown as he surveyed it. He wanted to see something on it that wasn't there—he couldn't give it a name exactly, perhaps it was more laughter, more youth. Why, Beth was only sixteen and sometimes she seemed quite grown-up! He didn't like it.

She answered more impulsively, with more feeling, than he was accustomed to hear in her voice. "I'll be happy *anywhere*, where we can just stay 'put!' I'm *so* tired of traveling all the time! I can even stand this place—though what I've seen of it isn't exactly exciting. But, father—do you realize I haven't any real friends? I meet young people and get to like them and then mother decides to go somewhere else. You can't keep friendships with just letters. I realize I'll never see any of them again and I suppose I lose interest, myself. I hope we stay here a long, long time. Oh, I hope mother forms a deep attachment for Dr. Waring!" She laughed as she said it, then sobered. "I mean more than that—I wish Dr. Waring would make her *quite well*—like you said she was, before I was born."

Mrs. Bradford joined them, then. She was smaller than Beth, extremely thin, with feverishly bright

eyes and over-flushed cheeks. A maid followed her, a load of wraps over her arm.

"I shall make the effort ——" Mrs. Bradford's voice always was a little shrill. "Of course I should not but you seemed to think it important. But, if I'm ill ——"

"Mother, you won't need any wraps," Beth protested, looking at Jeannette's burden.

"You never *try* to remember, Beth, how the slightest draught brings on my neuralgia! Jeannette, I think I'll take the cloth coat—no, I believe I'll be too warm in that, perhaps the silk cape will be enough —or, no, the Mandarin coat will be better—the air gets up under the cape—or ——"

Beth and Dalton Bradford waited, unsmiling. For an hour Mrs. Bradford had been swinging between going and not going—with reproaches that they should urge her to go, even tears. Now she would delay them longer, deliberating between wraps! But they did not murmur one impatient exclamation.

She chose the Mandarin coat. She looked like a bright little bird as she sat down in a corner of the big car. At the last moment she thought Jeannette should go. "I may have one of my fainting attacks ——"

"Dr. Waring will be there," Mr. Bradford reminded her gently and she dismissed Jeannette with an imperative wave of her hand.

"He has more brains than you'd expect to find in

a place like this," she commented, settling back in the car with a long sigh. "He realized at once that I am a very sick woman."

As they crossed the bridge leading to old Merridam Beth evinced interest. "I like this ——" she smiled at her father. "Aren't the trees beautiful? And the houses look like real, old people who could tell things, don't they? I'm glad the Warings live on this side. I hope they live in a very old house."

"I believe they do. Mr. Simms, at the Bank, who purveys all the village information to me, said that John Waring preferred to stick to his ancestral home rather than move across the river."

"Ancestral home! You make it sound like a castle," laughed Beth. She was familiar, too familiar to suit her present mood, with old castles and baronial halls. It amused her that her father should expect one here, in Merridam.

"Well ——" Dalton Bradford saw her smile. "Castles are what you make them. They do not have to be built of old stone and mouldering beams—I suppose we could make a castle of the house we're living in now—if we knew how."

Geoffrey had stopped the car. "This is the place," he said over his shoulder. He had ascertained the whereabouts of the Waring home before he started; Geoffrey prided himself on never getting lost.

John Waring was coming down the walk from the front door to greet the strangers. Susan had urged

him, rather sharply, not to do it—but he had shaken her hand off his arm with a laugh. Why not? They were like any other folks ——

Susan swept a last glance over the parlor. Certainly it was clean, and the sunshine, pouring in through the windows, gave it a happy glow, but her eyes saw only the old carpet and the old chairs and the old wall-paper, with the darker blotches where the discarded pictures had hung. She wished—her throat was tight in sudden panic—she wished she never had invited them! Tears were close to her eyes, tears of deepest vexation. But the tears were not entirely for the old room! Theo was nowhere around.

Petunia hadn't seen her since she'd eaten her lunch. Jard had not met her. Susan had looked in the closets. Even—down the well. It wouldn't be past Theo to hide like that!

"Oh, she'll appear," Dr. Waring had laughed, not much concerned for Susan's anger.

"Yes—but how?"

Dr. Waring escorted Mrs. Bradford into the house on his arm. The old-fashioned courtesy brought a little spark of triumph into the thin, over-flushed face. "Here is a man ——" it seemed to say.

"My daughter Susan ——"

Mrs. Bradford chose a stiff chair. "It supports my back," she explained to Susan. She kept the Man-

darin coat carefully around her. Her eyes darted here and there, to Susan's confusion.

Beth was shy but friendly and Susan was at ease with her at once. She was relieved that Mrs. Bradford preferred to talk to Dad.

"I haven't met anyone in Merridam," Beth was explaining, making Susan feel that she was glad to meet her. "We've been busy getting settled, of course —but it was so nice of you to ask us to come here."

Jard slipped unobtrusively in and Susan introduced him. No one noticed his embarrassment for Mrs. Bradford immediately commanded him to bring a chair and sit next to her. She appeared excited and eager and even for the moment to forget herself.

"Mother likes boys," Beth said in an undertone to Susan. "Often, when we're traveling, I've known her to make strange boys sit down next to her and talk to her. I've always wished I had a brother— or that I'd been a boy ——"

With considerable rattle Petunia brought in the tea. She and Susan had argued as to how the tea should be served; Petunia had said they ought to sit around the table in the dining-room, comfortable-like. Susan said not—emphatically. Susan had taken a small table into the parlor. She had instructed Petunia in the art of passing the plates and cups.

Again she wished she hadn't ever invited the Bradfords! Petunia was so awkward. Everything looked funny and not at all as it should look, and

everyone was so stiff. Mrs. Bradford was saying that she never drank tea and couldn't eat a crumb of cake—it made her deathly ill.

"But you've never eaten Petunia's cakes ——" Dr. Waring protested in the hearty voice which usually won his most difficult patients to acquiescence. Now it brought a smile to Petunia's face and a general unbending. And Mrs. Bradford took a little cake and put it on her plate. "It's on your head," she said almost archly. "If you're called over tonight ——"

Beth and Mr. Bradford appeared to enjoy the tea and the cakes. Mr. Bradford demanded a second filling of his cup almost at once.

"This is delicious! Is it some magic brew?"

If Susan had not been so alert for Theo's step she might have realized that her guests were really happy. Mr. Bradford and Dad were chatting like old friends. Mrs. Bradford had eaten her cake and drunk her tea, and let Jard fill her cup again. She was asking Jard innumerable questions, how old was he and where did he go to school and what did he do with himself and more, to all of which poor Jard answered shyly. And Beth's face was alight with pleasure. If Susan's heart had not been heavy with dread she might have seen the old room dignified and the pink and white china the beautiful Wedgwood it was, even Petunia for a character above the accepted pattern of servitors.

Where *was* Theo?

And at precisely that moment in her apprehension Theo came in. She wore the new dress, ruffled down the blouse and girt at the waist with a bright ribbon, her hair was brushed smooth and her face shone with scrubbing—Susan's sharp eyes, swiftly surveying her, could find nothing amiss, not even defiance in her manner, until they fell to the level of Theo's feet. Then she looked away, furious, her cheeks hot with mortification.

Theo, aware that she was late, had come home across-lots from Jasper's. She had slipped cautiously up the back stairs and dressed in haste. But she'd forgotten to change her shoes. And they were covered with mud from Abner Ladd's furrowed field.

But John Waring did not see the shoes. He smiled at Theo. "This is my little girl. Theo, I want you to meet Mrs. Bradford and Mr. Bradford and Beth."

Theo advanced into the room, her lips set tightly. Behind them she was saying to herself: "Now they'll know." The moment of Susan's humiliation was at hand!

But no one appeared to recognize her! Mrs. Bradford held her cold hand in colder fingers and dropped it at once to turn back to Jard. Mr. Bradford beamed on her. And Beth greeted her with curious, friendly eyes. "Why—we must be about the same age!" she said with eager frankness. If anyone of them noticed her shoes they were too polite to even glance at them.

"Do eat a cake so that I may have an excuse to take another," Beth laughed. "I'm a pig—but you don't know how good they taste. I guess it's—being here. This seems so like home and I haven't had a home in my whole life. You see we've traveled, on account of mother's health."

She said it simply, without the slightest affectation. Theo had to take the cake and she had to answer something. It sounded like: "They're good." She bit hard into it. Though she avoided looking directly at Beth she was conscious of every detail of her from the lovely green hat to the tips of her shoes. "I hate her—smarty," she thought. She took in Jard, next to Mrs. Bradford. He was actually talking and his eyes had their nice look. He was not suffering, as Theo had wanted him to suffer with these strangers.

And Dad was asking Mr. Bradford if he'd like to see the garden. "Rather an old-fashioned sort of garden ——" And Mr. Bradford was saying that he loved that kind, too few of them nowadays.

Mrs. Bradford wanted to see the garden, too—if Jard would go with her. They went out through the study door, Mrs. Bradford clinging to Jard's arm. The girls were left alone.

Beth's eyes had followed her mother with a little smile. "Oh, I hope we stay here a long time! It depends upon mother, of course. Or no—it depends upon your father. We stay in one place exactly as

long as mother likes the doctors or the baths there." Her frankness was charmingly friendly. "I hope you'll let me come here, often. And that you'll come to our house. Do you have picnics—and jolly things like that?" She addressed herself to Theo.

"Oh, sometimes ——" Theo answered, shortly.

"Can't we have one, soon? All of us. We passed the jolliest picnic party—that day we drove down here. It was by the river ——"

Theo swallowed too quickly and had to cough. But Beth was describing the picnic party and did not notice it or the resentful jerk of Theo's shoulders. A big basket and things spread out under a tree. And there was a canoe and someone had a ukulele. Then her glance went to the old square piano in the corner. "Do you play?" There was a sudden wistfulness in her voice.

"Oh, Susan plays some. I don't. Nobody much touches it—it's awfully out of tune," which, collectively, were more words than Theo had spoken all afternoon. She bit her lips as if she regretted having unbent that much.

A little conscious color had crept into Beth's face. "I love music—but it makes mother terribly nervous. Can't we all see the garden?" she asked abruptly.

"Of course," Susan said politely.

Dr. Waring and Mr. Bradford were deep in conversation at the far end of the garden. Mrs. Bradford, still clinging in a proprietary way to Jard's

arm, was examining the old herbaceous border. The girls stopped at the swing.

"Oh, I love this." Beth lifted her face to the great arching trees. "It's like a story-book garden. I remember, when we were staying in Paris, peeping into an old garden every time I passed it and wishing, oh, so much, that I might play in it. I used to call it my secret garden and pretend all sorts of things about it. It was ages ago." She laughed, her blue eyes a deeper blue. "Father said something, coming over here, about how we could make any place in which we lived a castle—if we knew how. I believe you know how—I wish you'd teach me!"

Theo had no answer for such an amazing appeal —it might have been put in a foreign tongue for all the understanding she gave it. And though Susan herself could not comprehend Beth Bradford saying such a thing for any reason other than politeness, she threw herself into the breach of Theo's silence. "We want to be friends, too." She said it in her prim, "party" voice. "You see there aren't many really nice girls in Merridam, yours and Theo's age."

CHAPTER IX

THE Bradfords were the topic of conversation around the Waring supper table that evening, Petunia and Susan doing most of the talking.

Susan held the afternoon a success in spite of, as she put it, embracingly, "everything." "Why, Beth Bradford acted as if she'd never been invited *any*-where before! Her clothes weren't so much—I thought I was going to feel like a rag-doll alongside of her, but I didn't. Her hat was pretty ——"

"Mis' Bradford sticking up her nose at the victuals and then most swallering 'em whole!" from Petunia. Hers and Susan's voices ran side by side. "If you ask me I'll say there ain't anything the matter with her more'n she wants, to keep folks jumpin' 'round her."

"Didn't she take a shine to Jard, though?" Susan's laughing glance teased Jard.

"Mr. Bradford seemed nice-spoken, but, my land, wasn't his bones picked? You couldn't of found a pinch-ful of fat on him anywhere. I guess mebbe that comes of his wife's nagging ——"

Then Susan turned severely to Theo.

"It wouldn't have hurt *you* to have been more civil, Theo. Beth really seems to want to be friends

and if Merridam people see you two together they will stop talking—about that other thing!"

Anything Susan might have said about her being late or about her shoes, Theo could have answered. She really hadn't been late deliberately; she could have explained that she'd found poor Jasper crippled with rheumatism and she'd made him some tea and then she'd ferried old Cy Meacham across, thereby earning ten cents to put in Jasper's tin can of savings; she might have admitted to Susan that she really was sorry about forgetting to change her shoes —but when Susan said what she did Theo clamped her lips tight shut and looked what she'd like to say out of smouldering eyes.

Dr. Waring spoke. He'd been smiling down at his plate, unconscious of the storm gathering on Theo's face or Susan's reprimand.

"Funny thing—Mr. Bradford's rather thrown his whole family on our mercy!"

Even Petunia stared at that. Susan's eyes grew wide and curious. She forgot Theo.

"Out in the garden—we got to talking rather personally. I do not think I'm betraying any confidence if I tell you what he said. I rather gathered, from everything, that though they've had a great deal of money, they haven't been very happy. Mrs. Bradford's been—well, ailing, ever since the girl was born and she's dragged them both around with her here, there, and everywhere. They've never stayed

in any one place long enough to call it home. You know, I felt sorry for them, hearing him talk like that ——"

"*Sorry!*" The echo escaped from Susan's incredulous lips. She could not apply the word to the Bradfords!

"Yes, sorry. Is it beyond your comprehension, Susan, that we may have, in our simple way of living, something people like the Bradfords have missed? Anyway, he seems to think so. And if we can help them—why, we'll do it, won't we?" Dr. Waring's eyes were twinkling. This was just the sort of "case" he liked to work on.

He did not tell them that Mr. Bradford had admitted to him that he'd gone into this pottery business simply as an excuse to establish his family in some place remote from the "quacks" to whom his wife was such an easy victim. He feared, perhaps, that that might be too tempting a bit of information for Petunia to keep to herself at the next meeting of the Maccabees.

Susan lapsed into silence, inwardly trying to adjust herself to her father's revelation. What could there be in their "simple way of living," as Dad had put it, that the Bradfords could possibly want? Her mental eye, in a sort of composite picture, saw the old house and the old, shabby, worn furnishings, their uneventful lives as opposed to Beth's gilded travels. But then, maybe, Mr. Bradford had been just try-

ing to make Dad, the country doctor, feel comfortable! Yet Beth had seemed really eager when she'd talked about the picnic. Poor Susan was torn between skepticism and desire. In a way it took something of the shine from the Bradfords, for them to want to be "simple"; on the other hand, it opened a rather dizzying prospect.

The instant the smart car had borne the Bradfords away Theo had gone to her room and torn off her new dress, with a violence that threatened Matilda Maple's stitches. She had eaten little for supper and contributed nothing to Petunia's and Susan's rehash of the afternoon's party, except only a withering scorn which she kept to herself. And after supper she slipped away, unobserved.

At its far end the garden gave on an old orchard of pear trees beyond which the ground sloped through a tangle of undergrowth to a little brook. Here old willows bordered the stream, their graceful, drooping branches meeting and interlocking, like great fingers, over the water. "Wildwood," Jard had named it years ago, in a flight of fancy. It had been a favorite play-place with Jard and Theo from their earliest childhood. It had magic and happy remoteness for it was beyond the call of Petunia's voice and Susan rarely disturbed them there because she was afraid of snakes and hated to walk through the thick tangle of grass and weeds. Theo and Jard had played pirates, with treasure coves in the bends of the

stream, they had sailed boats among the rocks, waded in the deeper pools, hunted the first cardinal flowers. They had climbed the trees, Theo venturing even out on the highest limb over the stream. One day, climbing, she had missed her hold and fallen ——

She went down to the Wildwood now. The gathering twilight was making dancing shadows about her and the air was full of the twittering of birds and little rustlings of secret hidden life but Theo was deaf to it. It was Jard who interpreted such things for her and Jard was not with her.

She sat down with her back to a tree-trunk and hugged her knees to her chin. Her eyes stared moodily at the little pricks of light over the water, where it caught and threw back the last lingering sunrays, but she did not see them. Her gloomy gaze was turned inward.

And what she saw was dark, indeed, to her thinking. Instead of the Bradfords recognizing and repudiating her as the girl they'd seen fighting on the road they'd invited friendliness. Perhaps Matilda Maple's hated ruffle *had* disguised her! She was helpless, now, before Susan's scheming.

However she would *not* be friends with Beth Bradford, no matter how much or how cleverly Susan schemed. She would *not*. But even while she vowed it she gave a sigh so deep that it seemed to come from her toes and quiver through her whole being. And that sigh had nothing to do with her un-

friendly vow but was born out of her overwhelming consciousness of Beth's perfections. That brief exaltation she had felt over her own anticipated blossoming came back like a ghost, to mock her. To jeer. Imagine her thinking even for an idle moment that *she* could blossom! She scowled into the space before her as if that Theo Waring she was stood there, skinny, dark-skinned as a gypsy, snub-nosed, and worse, a disgrace. Any blossoming that might come to her with the passing months could be but a sorry, dark blossoming.

Well, there was something else she could do—she'd do it, too. Jasper had put it into her head, this very day.

"Jasper, what would you do if you were somebody and everyone was against you?" And Jasper had cackled: "I'd heave to and clear port. That's what I done when I wasn't bigger'n a belayin' pin. The seas're wide and they're free and Jasper Smart's asked no favors of any man!" His eyes under their bushy brows had glowed and he'd thrown out his old chest at the cost of a sharp twinge of pain.

"But, Jasper, weren't you ever—sorry?"

Jasper had been positive in his answer. He had cackled again, reminiscently. "No. Roamin's for them's got roamin' in their blood, I sez, and let the landlubber grow his roots if he's so minded. God made some of us to live with folks and some of us to live free as the wind—jes as he made scary wild

things in the woods 'round here and the tame things. I wasn't the tame kind to take sass and beatin's when I couldn't hit back. Not me. No, I ain't been sorry I hid on that tramp-trader sailin' for a furrin' port ——"

"Why'd ye ask?" he'd demanded, then. "Who's agin who?"

But Theo had changed the subject abruptly. It was not a matter to confide to Jasper. And his mind had gone on to some hazy memory of that first voyage.

She could go away. She had almost twenty dollars of her own which she'd been saving for a new bicycle. She'd go to Boston and find a job. Connie Meggs had gone to Boston and hired out as a nursemaid. She was getting ten dollars a week and her "keep." Petunia had told about it.

But Petunia also had pictured Connie Meggs as probably eating leavings from the table and sleeping in an attic, neither of which would have appealed to Theo under other circumstances. Now, however, such a fate gave her a sad satisfaction.

Her family would be grateful to her for going. Dad wouldn't have to look so sorry about having let her run "loose" and Susan wouldn't have to worry about the things the Braces told of her because she wouldn't be around where folks could point their fingers at her. And Jard ——

Her lips threatened to quiver and she pressed them into a hard line.

Jard wouldn't miss her. He'd shown her just how much he cared about her! She could think that now, bitterly, even here in the Wildwood where every stick and stone and bending tree branch was a reminder of their good times together. She did not see them—she remembered, instead, different times when Jard had laughed at her or snubbed her or withdrawn himself into one of his "spells" because she had made him angry. She saw a different Jard from the boy she had adored. Oh, at fifteen, one can be hard! And Theo, sitting there in the gathering shadows, wanted to be hard because she was suffering herself.

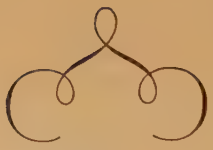
She remembered, all at once, the day she'd fallen out of the tree. It hadn't hurt her, except for some painful bruises and to jar her so that for a moment she couldn't open her eyes. And Jard had run a little way off and had not come back until she called to him. And then his face had been queer and white and scowling—as if she'd done it on purpose to scare him. She had had to assure him that she was all right before he'd say a word. Why—he'd looked just like that the night in the garden, after he knew about her fighting with Joe Brace! Maybe he was waiting now until she told him she was all right. Well, he could wait.

And then a doubt shot across her mind, almost as

if a voice had spoken it in her ear. Was Jard, maybe, a coward? Had Dad acted so funny and upset, that afternoon, because *he* thought Jard was a coward, and didn't want to think so? The way he'd said Jard had to fight his own battles ——

But with all her hardness she would not give room to such a thought. No, no! Jard wasn't. He hated suffering and seeing people hurt and unhappy—but *that* wasn't cowardice. And he loved stories of valor and noble deeds—he was always reading them. Staunchly she defended Jard to herself and with it her hardness melted, leaving her sad and tender.

Why, if she went away there'd be no one to stand by Jard! She couldn't go away, after all.



CHAPTER X

THEO'S first feeling, on waking the next morning, was a great relief that she did not have to run away! At least not now. She added that, to steady her little involuntary rush of joy.

She reminded herself with a sobering face that though she dedicated her future to Jard, a bittersweet service because Jard would not know of it, it must be a dreary future, quite empty of all the jolly, familiar things that had filled her days, robbed of the joyous freedom she had known.

She dressed slowly giving new care to the process. She brushed her hair before the mirror staring a little intently at the black mop and at the face beneath it. For her fifteen years Theo scarcely had glanced at herself in any mirror and now she did so with curiosity rather than with any inner delight. She must have changed a little after her renunciation—she thought of it like that, forgetting the leavings and the attic bedroom. Yesterday—or a few days ago she had been one girl and now she was another.

It seemed strange to her that no one of the family noticed any change in her—that breakfast should go forward like any other Sunday morning breakfast

with Petunia hurrying them because they'd be late for church. Dad and Petunia and Susan went regularly to church and sometimes Jard and, less often, Theo, for Dad was easy-going in the matter, and left it to their inclination.

Today Theo was going to go. She didn't want to go but for that very reason she determined to go.

"Dad, I believe I'll call up Beth Bradford and ask her if she wants to meet us at church," Susan said when she finished breakfast. She tried to make it appear like a sudden inspiration.

She came back from the telephone with an annoyingly important set of her head. "She was awfully pleased," she reported. Theo had the conviction that it was only by a mighty effort Susan had refrained from shouting it. "She'll meet us there. She said maybe her father would go, too. I believe I'll wear my new dress. Are you going, Theo? I think you ought to go."

Of course Theo's impulse was to deny any intention of going but she disciplined it and nodded her head, frowning. But she wasn't going to put on that dress with the hideous ruffle!

The Warings attended the First Baptist Church on the new Merridam side of the river. It was built on a high, brick foundation to give room for the Sunday-school classes, with long narrow windows of red and blue squares of glass on each side of the front door. When the Methodists built a new church on Main

Street some of the members of the First Baptist had gone over to the rival fold but the Warings had stayed on, also the Martin Braces, the former because it would not occur to John Waring to change the habit of years and the latter because, so Petunia said, the new Methodist preacher's wife had "stepped on Sophie Brace's toes."

Back of the church was the low, long shed built years ago to shelter the horses and buggies from wind and sun and rain. Even now there were still a few horses tied each Sunday to the big rusty iron rings but for the most part the church-goers came in cars and parked them on the thin grass in front of the church.

"I wonder if Beth will come in her car ——" Susan said excitedly as they approached the church. Theo knew Susan hoped she would. But she hadn't. She was standing on the walk and her father was with her. She waved her hand to them and ran forward to meet them. Theo took in her appearance, the simple cloth dress and the small hat of the same color and the trim shoes and silk stockings and had to put down a sudden wish that she'd dressed more carefully.

"I'm so glad you called us. Father and I were talking about going to church but we felt like such strangers." Beth was walking up to the door between Theo and Susan, smiling at one and then the

other. Jard and Petunia followed them and Mr. Bradford and Dr. Waring brought up the rear.

"It's a funny old church but all the old families come here," Susan explained while Theo stiffened, a little prickle of shame flashing over her. If Susan knew how *silly* she sounded, trying to put on those airs!

Lucy Maple was playing the organ. Half the pews were filled already. Martin Brace and his wife and his two daughters were in their pew on the left toward the back. The Waring pew was on the right, fourth from the front. Theo was not so conscious of the eyes that turned toward them as of the expression on Susan's face as she led the Bradfords down the aisle. It was—sickening. And after they had sat down she saw Susan twisting her neck to peep at the Braces.

Theo heard nothing of the service. Whatever motive had inspired her to come with the family was lost in a disturbing consciousness of Beth's proximity. Without moving her glance from the window over the pulpit upon which she fixed it stubbornly, she could see Beth's face, properly sober, but with a little smile hovering on her lips, she could feel an eagerness radiating from the slender, prettily-clad girl that had nothing to do with the singing or the prayers or the shabby old church. She felt that friendly eagerness and hardened herself against it, frowning heav-

ily at the glass saints over the Reverend Carter's bald head.

After meeting the Reverend Carter came down in the aisle to greet the strangers. His manner was a little flurried, apologetic: "If I'd known you were coming ——" A circle of men and women gathered around, smiling and awkwardly gracious. Susan beamed on them all. But the Braces were not among them. Susan had seen them stalking out of the church.

"Can't you walk over to our house for a little while?" Beth asked, a little shyly.

Susan agreed readily, so readily that Theo blushed with embarrassment.

They walked together, Susan and Theo with Beth between them. Mr. Bradford, having shaken hands in parting with John Waring, fell into step with Everett Simms and his wife. "A lovely morning, isn't it?" everyone was saying. "A good sermon, don't you think so?" They met the Methodist congregation coming out of the new stone Methodist Church and there were more greetings. Theo could hear Everett Simms saying: "Meet Mr. Bradford." And she saw Susan's triumphant air as she spoke to this person and that. It said plainly: "See us! Theo and I are very good friends with Beth Bradford."

Theo's step dragged. She said little. She didn't want to be walking like this with Beth Bradford to her house, just so that folks could see her.

The Bunting house—so called because it had been built for one Josiah Bunting who died a few years after he moved into it—was on Center Street, the show street of the village. It stood, a conglomeration of every type of architecture, in a big square of lawn dotted with round flower beds. It had concrete walks and a concrete drive which curved under a porte-cochère. On the other side was an enclosed terrace—Merridam called it a conservatory, which during Josiah Bunting's brief occupation of the house had been filled with palms and rubber plants and sickly orange trees in tubs and a parrot in a green wicker cage. Josiah Bunting had added a fountain, too—a nymph holding a shallow vessel in her hands from which water trickled to a concrete basin below filled with glass flowers. By turning on an electric current these flowers took on blues and greens and yellows, like the parrot's plumage. Josiah Bunting and all Merridam for that matter had been very proud of the fountain and some few who did not have the privilege of seeing it in all its glory from the inside had quite openly peeped through the window at it.

Martin Brace lived on Center Street, too. But his house was not as large as the Bunting house and had no porte-cochère or fountain. A big sign "Martin Brace, Contractor," defaced its front.

Susan did not turn her head toward Martin Brace's house but Theo did, involuntarily, and when she saw

Joe Brace standing in the door of the garage she felt her neck grow a little warm.

A maid in a trim apron and cap admitted them. She told Beth in an undertone that Mrs. Bradford wasn't "so well." She said it in a significant way and Beth's face altered at once, the smile leaving her lips and a worried hesitation twitching at their corners. "Mother felt so much better when we left ——" She said it in an undertone, like the maid's.

She led them into the parlor, walking almost on tip-toe though no one's step could have made any sound on the velvety rugs. Her father went upstairs, walking softly, too.

Susan's eyes darted here and there and everywhere all at one and the same time, devouring everything, the pink satin chairs, the pinkish rug that was as big as a carpet, the little shiny tables. The front and back parlors of Josiah Bunting's time had been changed into one big room and a wide door led into the "conservatory." Where the palms and rubber plants had been were wicker chairs, deeply cushioned with bright chintz, trailing ivy in dull-hued jars. The fountain was gone.

Beth took them on to the terrace. "It's nicer, here," she explained and then added: "Mother can't hear us here, either."

Her eagerness was quite gone. Even though her mother couldn't hear them she still spoke in that

lowered tone. She appeared almost embarrassed and a little shy, now, with her guests.

"Did you ever see the fountain that was here?" she asked them. "Father told me how funny it was. It's out in the garage now. Most of this furniture is new—you see we've never had much of our own. I'll be glad when it looks as though we used it—if it ever does." She was actually apologizing for the house! "I wish ——" She stopped abruptly on that.

Even Susan felt a constraint. Her chatter was a little forced and trivial. And she sprang up from her chair as quickly as Theo when Jard turned into the drive.

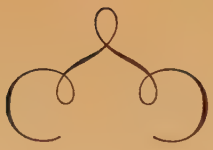
But in the Ford, homeward bound, Susan's enthusiasm returned. Did anyone ever see lovelier furniture? The satin cushions of the chairs, the way they shone, and so soft! And the rugs—you felt as if you were walking on cotton-wadding! And the chandeliers—gleaming like jewels. Susan overlooked nothing.

"I thought it was an awful house!" Theo said abruptly.

"That's all you know about houses! You just want to be disagreeable. Well, anyway, I hope Sophie Brace saw us."

Theo made no retort. She hadn't said what she had to be disagreeable. She'd simply spoken her thought aloud. It *had* seemed an awful house—but its awfulness had not so much to do with the furnish-

ings as with its sinister quiet and with the change she had seen come over Beth. She could not explain her feeling, herself. She only knew that she'd hate to live there, like that, as Beth lived. And against her will, very much against it, a vague pity for Beth held her.



CHAPTER XI

THE middle of June would bring the summer vacation. There would be a week of intensive review, a week of examinations, Commencement and the school party and then long, happy, care-free days, while dust gathered on discarded schoolbooks.

Theo, along about the first of June, always counted the days until the end. "Three more days in this week and seven in next week" and so on, as a prisoner might count the days before release from a dreary routine. Freedom—it was that. She loved the summer-time, the hot sun, the scented fruited earth, her unhampered comings and goings. She always grew to look more than ever like a gypsy; her dark freckles merged into a rich tan, her mop of black hair thickened and shone glossily—she needed only bright scarlets and bangles to be the perfect Romany child. She roamed the woods and the roads about old Merridam, fished from Jasper's boat and swam where the water was deep at the bend near Alcott's farm—hunted wild raspberries and blackberries, knew all the birds' nests and the little secret places of the squirrels and chipmunks. Sometimes Jard was her companion, sometimes she roamed alone. Infrequently she played with some of her schoolmates, Vi

Simms or Carolyn Stebbins or Madie Clapp, but she never sought them out, joining them only on their importuning and then only when Jard failed her and her own company wasn't enough for her mood.

"You'd never think them two was blood-related," Petunia often had remarked, comparing Theo with Susan. Even when Susan was younger she'd like to sew and fuss around the kitchen with Petunia. And before that she'd played with her dolls, demurely, on the kitchen porch or in the garden. Susan had liked to play with other little girls, but her games had been "playing party" or "puss-wants-a-corner" and such, never of pirates or Indians, with hidden wigwams in the woods and council fires that set Abner Jenkins' fields ablaze! Susan had been a "tidy" child with a violent dislike of dirt on her hands or clothes.

But John Waring only had laughed when Petunia grumbled. He had a way of pinching Theo's cheeks without hurting, as if he liked them.

This June found a sobered Theo. She was not counting the days—at least no one heard her. She told herself sadly that for various and regrettable reasons this summer couldn't be like other summers, so why look forward to it? She threw herself into a last-hour cramming for examinations, a confused cramming where Algebra mixed itself with Latin verbs and history dates with Wordsworth and Shelley. But she really did not aim to pass her examina-

tions credibly; she studied more to escape Susan's silly planning. "Oh, I've got to work!" Susan couldn't get around that even if she did smile disagreeably.

Perhaps she buried herself in her books to keep from remembering that she'd felt sorry for Beth Bradford. She did not want to think of her except to think how she didn't like her. But she could not lose that impression she had carried away with her from the house on Center Street. It came back whenever she heard Susan filling Petunia's greedy ears with the wonders of the Bradford parlor. Beth, walking on tip-toe, speaking in that funny, half-scared voice. Why, even the way Mr. Bradford had gone upstairs had been funny and scared-like.

Theo saw, with humiliation and a sense of defeat, that Susan had played a masterstroke when she asked Beth Bradford to go to church with them. Every one in Merridam knew that Mr. Bradford and Beth had sat in the Waring pew their first Sunday. If it had been a real gesture of friendliness on Susan's part, if Theo hadn't known the motive that lay behind it, she might not have smarted under the questions the girls in school put to her. Had she and Susan known the Bradfords before? Was Beth Bradford stuck up? Was it so that there were three hired girls in that house and did that chauffeur wear a white coat like a waiter when he wasn't chauffeuring? That and much more. And what was the matter with Mrs.

Bradford—she could go out riding but she wouldn't see anyone. Delia Forman, who lived in the house next to the Bradford's told how she'd heard someone in the Bradford house crying terribly in the night; it'd given her the creeps so that she'd shut her window.

Theo hated the questioning and the importance her schoolmates held her in because she had gone back to the Bradford house with Beth from church. But she could say nothing of how she hated it, for to do that would show up Susan's scheming.

Her self-imposed study would keep her mind from something else, too. From Jard's Junior Essay. Each year the Juniors, at least those so inspired, wrote essays and submitted them to the School Board, anonymously, their names and the titles of their essays enclosed in sealed envelopes accompanying the manuscripts. On the last day of classes, Mr. Piper, the principal of the school, announced the winner who had the honor of reading his essay at Commencement.

Theo knew Jard coveted that honor. Not that he'd enjoy it—to stand before a room full of people, even classmates and Merridam folk, would be painful to him, but he wanted the achievement of writing something that was good. He'd talked to Theo about it. It was one of their "secrets." "I'd like to write stuff when I'm through school." "Books?" Theo had asked, in deep awe. "Oh, books—or things like that."

It had not been easy for Jard to put his ambition into words. But Theo had had words enough for both of them, and enthusiasm, too. "Oh, you can, Jard—you can write grand things. You'll be famous, someday. You'll be terribly rich so that you can go everywhere. Why, you can go to darkest Africa." Ever since a missionary, home on leave, had spoken before the Sunday-school, Theo had thought darkest Africa held alluring adventure. She had said much more until Jard bade her shortly: "Forget it. I'm just talking."

Jard was a Junior, now. She knew he'd begun his essay weeks ago. She'd found a sheet of paper with something on it and Jard had snatched it away from her, flushing. If it had been anything else he wouldn't have flushed like that. And, after that, when he'd been particularly intent and detached in his work she had watched him with proud satisfaction. His essay, of course, would be better than any other.

But she could not ask him, now, anything about it. Her hurt had built its barrier and she would not cross it. However, passing Jard's room and seeing a folded sheaf of papers on his desk, she had tiptoed in and peeped at it. "Unsung Heroes." The title was neatly printed across the top of the outer sheet. It was Jard's essay. Her hands trembled with excitement as she took it up. Jard was nowhere around—she read lines here and there. Oh, they were grand! "It is not the lieutenant, leading his forces over the top,

lusting for conquest, who merits the medals and the acclaim—it is the last man who, stumbling, uncertain, sick of the business, sick for his home and his folks, and who goes ahead in spite of that, because he's been told to go, he is your unsung hero——" And in another place: "I saw a man laying bricks, matching them together, and building higher and higher walls before which other men were to stand and admire, with no thought of the patient energy that had put them there——" And on another page: "What of the men who work in mines under the ground that we may have coal to heat our houses and fire our ships and our steam engines? What of the men who dig in dark places that our fast trains may rush under mountains and rivers? Who thinks of that army of toilers in the dark?" Why, it was wonderful! Imagine Jard writing *that*. Theo felt tears back of her eyes. It was so beautifully different. Every other essay she'd ever heard had been about George Washington or Lincoln or the Pilgrims or the Monroe Doctrine or something like that but these were Jard's thoughts, put down on paper. She wished, sorrowfully, that Jard might read it to her because when he read things he made her understand them and she couldn't exactly understand this, only feel Jard's sympathy for all those poor men. And it was all punctuated so neatly and the margins were so beautifully even! Oh, Jard was sure to win the contest.

The school assembled on the last day to hear Mr. Piper announce the vote of the School Board. The essays had been in their hands for two weeks. The Board had met—at Martin Brace's house—three times to talk over the essays. Jennie Brace had told about the meetings at school. She and her mother had served coffee and sandwiches.

Theo hated to think of Martin Brace reading Jard's essay—even holding it in his hands. But he was only one of five; surely the four others must see that Jard's was different, that Jard, someday, would be a famous writer.

She fancied Jard was excited that last day of school. He was like his old self and for a little while Theo forgot that anything had happened between them. "Well, one more year of school after this——" Jard said, laughing and looking quite grown-up. "And then a fellow has to decide things." Of course he was thinking about his writing.

Mr. Piper was a thin man, slightly stooped, with a prominent Adam's apple and nervous hands. He suffered from chronic bronchitis which necessitated his coughing a great deal when he spoke. It seemed to Theo this day that he coughed more than ever. The assembled pupils shuffled their feet and twisted restlessly about in their chairs, waiting for him to begin, the Juniors more restless than the others. The Seniors looked important and a little detached from the business of the assembly. And in the whole group

no heart pounded harder than Theo's—no one waited with greater impatience for Mr. Piper to clear his bronchial tubes.

Mr. Piper began with appropriate words for the closing of the school year. Then he coughed some more. And then: "I am happy to announce the winner of this year's Essay Contest." Theo sat forward, her hands tight-locked and a little sensation of goose-flesh creeping over her. Her eyes were shining. "The chairman of the School Board told me that it found great difficulty in deciding upon the winning essay because so many very good essays had been submitted, which is a credit to our Junior class and to our English department. But after careful study and discussion they agreed without a dissenting vote that the honor for this year goes to Joseph Brace, who has written a most interesting appeal for the unsung heroes of this world."

In the burst of applause Theo's cry was lost.

She sat back in her seat, stunned. Not angry at once—simply unbelieving. There was some mistake, of course. It would be straightened out —— Everyone must know that there'd been a mistake. But as the significance of the applause penetrated to her senses she went all hot with fury. It ought to be for Jard and not for—for that ——

She did not dare look toward Jard. And when the schoolbody began to march out Jard was not in sight. In the hall she dropped out of the line. "What is it,

Theodate?" asked Miss Ames, a little impatiently. "I've got to see Mr. Piper." Miss Ames moved as though to wave Theo back into the line, then hesitated, perhaps startled out of her routine of discipline by the expression on Theo's face. "If you wish to see Mr. Piper the office is the place to seek him and the time after dismissal. However, you may run down now."

It was not possible to see Mr. Piper at once for there were last-day demands upon his time. Theo waited—her anger mounting. And where was Jard? Why wasn't he here claiming his rights?

"Do you wish to speak to me, Theodate?" Mr. Piper asked presently.

"Yes. There's been a mistake. Joe Brace didn't write that essay. Jard did." Theo spoke fast, her cheeks blazing.

Mr. Piper looked startled, then pained. "Sit down, Theo." He waved her to a chair. "You realize you are making a rather serious charge?" He was frowning with displeasure.

"Well, Jard wrote that. I saw it."

Mr. Piper frowned more heavily. "My dear girl, you must see on reflection how absurd your statement is. Joe's handwriting is perfectly familiar to his father who was one of the committee who read the essays. We have no reason to think Joe would lend himself to copying."

"Well, I have——" blurted Theo, hotly.

Mr. Piper coughed. "I am afraid, my child, you are letting your prejudices control your suspicions. A story—a rather unpleasant story—came to my ears a short time ago, about some unfriendly er—er altercation between you and Joe. I was very sorry to hear about it, very sorry, indeed, to hear such a thing concerning one of our pupils and especially of John Waring's daughter. This community holds your father in great respect. Now—aren't you convinced that you are hasty and mistaken in your charge against Joe?" Mr. Piper smiled propitiatingly. He shuffled some papers on his desk. "I suppose you are happy that school is so nearly over. And next year you'll be—let me see, a Junior?" He prided himself on his knowledge of each separate pupil.

Theo did not answer. She wouldn't retract her charge, but she did not know what to say. Anyway it was plain that Mr. Piper was not going to listen even if she said anything more. One of the Seniors put his head into the door and Mr. Piper turned to him. "Well, Thomas, what can I do for you?"

Theo stumbled out of the room. She returned to her study room and took her seat. She would not trust herself to look at any one about her—not even Madie Clapp who was making a little hissing sound to attract her attention. She really wanted to shout to them all that Joe Brace hadn't written that essay!

How could anyone believe he had—that big bulk of a know-nothing?

She did not linger after dismissal to exchange alarms over the next week's examinations. She ran out of the school yard. She must find Jard. She'd tell him she knew. They'd find a way of exposing Joe Brace. It was so simple—of course he'd stolen Jard's essay out of the bunch of them and copied it, word for word, and put his own name in an envelope. It had been easy for him to do it because Jenny Brace had taken the essays home with her to give them to her father.

Jard was nowhere around. Perhaps he had walked home with Phil Clapp. He sometimes did. She ran down the street on which the Clapps lived, a furious figure of a girl, her hair blowing and her eyes angry. But Mrs. Clapp, sitting sewing on her veranda, told her Phil hadn't come home yet. Mrs. Clapp stared at Theo but Theo did not care.

Well, maybe Jard had gone home. Probably he had—that's what he'd do, feeling as he must feel. She ran across the bridge to old Merridam. She had to slow down to a walk for need of breath. She felt a queer tingling—oh, if she could meet Joe Brace now!

Then she remembered what Mr. Piper had said—she had not listened at the moment but now it came back to her. She saw Joe's treachery as a comeback on her. He'd hurt Jard like this to even up his

score. *She'd* done this to Jard, herself. If she'd ignored that other taunt ——

That really hadn't mattered, as Dad said; it hadn't mattered what Joe Brace called Jard—but *this* mattered, oh, terribly ——

She suffered all the pangs of remorse. Oh, she'd do anything to right this wrong! She'd tell Jard that she was sorry for all the mean things she'd been thinking. Why, it was *that,* her thinking all those things more than the way Jard'd been acting, that had come between them! This enlightenment eased her heart a little of its burden of self-blame and concern. Things between her and Jard would be like they'd been, before.

She found Jard in his room. One glance told her that he was in one of his black moods—blacker than any. But she did not falter before it.

"Jard, I know that wasn't Joe Brace's essay. It was yours ——" She paused to control her excitement.

"What're you talking about?" Jard growled at her.

"You did write it! You know you did!" Theo pleaded.

"Write that essay? I should say I didn't. I didn't turn in any. Who said I did? You're crazy. Mind your own business for a change." And Jard turned his back on her.

Theo slowly retreated. In her own room she put her arm across her eyes—she thought she was going to cry. Yet no tears came—somehow this hurt was too deep for tears. And it was not her hurt—it was Jard's. His angry denial had not hidden his bitterness.

CHAPTER XII

HE *did* write it! He *did* write it!"

Of course he'd written it. Hadn't it all been just like Jard's thoughts about things? Hadn't she *seen* it?

But he'd denied it—angrily. If he hadn't written it, he wouldn't have been so angry or so bitter. And he'd told her to mind her own business.

She felt no resentment that Jard had told her to mind her own business. Her heart was washed clean of all the hard feelings that had held it the last few weeks. She thought of the way Jard had looked when he denied it, the unhappiness on his face. By painful processes of thinking she tried to understand it. Somehow, now, it seemed more important to understand Jard than to expose Joe Brace. She could not talk it over with anyone, because it was too intimately Jard's affair to tell anyone about it unless Jard told her she might. Not even Dad.

She watched Jard closely, secretly—for she did not want him to know she was watching him. But she couldn't observe anything different in his manner. He was completely and confidently absorbed in his examinations. Well, Joe Brace couldn't copy his examination papers!

Theo herself forgot Algebra and Latin, history and English—she sat bent over an open book but she scarcely followed what was printed thereon. She forgot Beth Bradford and Susan, everything but this thing that had happened.

The hurt she felt for Jard deepened with the approach of Commencement. Of course Jard wouldn't go—and she wouldn't, either. She'd find some way of getting out of it. It was unthinkable that either of them could sit there and hear that red-necked Joe Brace read that beautiful essay ——

But Jard said nothing about staying away!

"Theo, why don't you take Beth to the Commencement and the party afterwards?" Susan asked. She did not wait for Theo to answer. "It'd be a chance for her to meet some of the girls and boys—the nicer ones. And maybe Jard can get Phil Clapp to go with you. Of course Henry and I could ask her to go with us but I think our crowd's too old for her." Susan spoke in the satisfied tone she used now when talking of the Bradfords.

Theo, frightened, looked at Jard. Of course now he'd have to say he wasn't going to Commencement. But Jard answered promptly, though a little gruffly. "I'll ask Phil. Guess he'd just as soon go along with us."

"Ask Beth now," Susan directed Theo.

"I wasn't going to stay to the dance."

"Well, it won't *hurt* you to stay—no wonder peo-

ple think you're queer!" Susan had difficulty controlling her exasperation.

Theo flushed a deep red. Curiously now she was sensitive to Susan's thrusts. If Jard went she'd have to go, to stand by him, and Beth might as well tag along. She thought of it like that. At Susan's second urging she telephoned to Beth.

She could not ignore the instant eagerness that came to Beth's voice. "Oh, I'd love to go!"

"We'll stop around for you." Theo tried to say it just as she'd say it to any of her schoolmates.

Thursday brought the end of the examinations, Friday the reports. Very creditable for Jard, but not so for Theo. She'd failed in Latin and history and just "skinned through" Algebra. She was not unaccustomed to such marks and always before had shrugged them off, but now, for some unaccountable reason, she smarted under them. She hated admitting them to Jard and to Dad—even to Susan. She heard herself saying: "Oh, well, I can study this summer and take the make-up in the fall," and was more startled than anyone of her family at hearing herself say it.

"Not a bad plan, scamp," her father beamed on her.

"Anyway, I might as well study ——" She said that to herself, afterwards, trying to excuse the strange impulse that had led her into planning it. The summer must be different—what with having to

puzzle out Jard acting so funny and with Beth Bradford thrust upon her.

Jard asked Phil to go with them to the Commencement and Phil was quite willing—a little excited at accompanying Beth Bradford, though Jard did not report that. However Theo sensed it the moment Phil joined them. He was usually quiet and a little shy, but now he was talkative. He had a new suit and a new hat and his face shone with scrubbing. Theo suspected that Jard had given considerable care to his own dressing. Petunia had pressed his suit and he'd bought a new tie. She herself had dressed abstractedly, her thoughts on Joe Brace reading about the Unsung Heroes. She hadn't even given one pull at the hated ruffle on her new dress.

Beth was waiting for them on the porch of the house. Susan had reminded Jard that he wasn't to honk the horn and let Beth walk out to the car unattended, as he would if they were stopping for any of the Merridam girls. But Mr. Bradford walked down to the car with Beth. "I wish I were a young lad going to a party with two nice girls," he laughed. It was just the sort of thing Dad would have said and it struck Theo as queer that Mr. Bradford, rich and traveled and quite different from Merridam, should have said a thing Dad would say. And he'd said it as if he did think it very jolly for Beth to be riding off in a dusty old Ford to a school party.

Beth displayed an eager interest in the school and

its auditorium and in the young people in their best clothes who were rapidly filling the seats with much chattering and laughter. Beth sat between Jard and Phil. Theo heard her telling the boys that she'd never gone to any school longer than a few weeks at a time. And that they'd always been "funny" schools—never American. She'd had tutors, mostly. There was a little wistful note in her voice as she told it.

The young people around them and the fathers and mothers of the young people stared quite openly at Beth but Theo was not conscious of it. She was steeling herself for the moment she dreaded; she scarcely heard the program as it went forward, with few variations from the Commencement programs of every spring preceding. She sat very straight in her seat with her eyes fixed on the flags draped over the stage and her lips set in a thin line. Inside she felt all quivering with Jard's hurt—and all bewildered, too. "Maybe I'm *crazy*," she thought, one moment. For how *could* Jard sit there beside her and endure it? But why had he denied writing that about the Unsung Heroes? It was like a horrible riddle circling around in her brain.

And presently Joe Brace was walking up on the platform. Mr. Piper must have been telling folks about him and his winning the Essay Contest—that was why everyone had clapped. Joe Brace looked very red and his tie was a little on one side and his

shoes squeaked. Theo was glad, *glad* of that! She moved forward with a quick jerk, and then, aware that Jard hadn't moved a muscle, she sat back again.

She wouldn't listen—not to a word. She looked furtively, in an agony of fear, at Jard, to see him scowling down at the floor. Oh, he *had* written it, of course he had. And why had he been content to let Joe steal the honor from him? Was it—was it because he'd been *afraid* to stand up for his rights?

Then at once she was ashamed that she had let such a thought into her mind. She felt her eyes smart with shamed, compassionate tears. For *her* to think such a thing, when really it was all her fault at the very beginning. She longed to put her hand on Jard's arm but she did not dare—she didn't dare show her sympathy. And that hurt, too.

At last Joe had finished—and she hadn't heard a word. Beth clapped with the others. "Why, that was a beautiful thing," Theo heard her say. "Funny, you wouldn't think that a boy who looked like that could write it, would you?"

"Oh, I don't know," Jard answered gruffly.

But it was over—Joe had taken his seat on the third row and Annie Cox had gone up onto the platform to sing. It was over and done and there wouldn't be any use ever trying to right it, now. Theo drew a long breath that quivered a little as it escaped her lips. If only she could *understand* why Jard had acted so queer!

But she felt a great relief. She even giggled across Jard to Beth. Annie Cox had sung that same song for years and years. But Beth didn't laugh. She was actually listening, intently, and with that little wistfulness with which Theo was becoming familiar but which she could not understand—listening while Annie sang: "Be-e-lieve me, if all those endearing young charms ——" her voice quavering on the higher notes.

The diplomas appropriately awarded, the boys fell to clearing a space for dancing by pushing the seats back against the wall. Around the platform an informal reception was going forward, mothers and fathers and teachers pressing about the young graduates. Theo pulled Beth back into a corner.

"I don't dance. At least not much. It always seemed kind of foolish."

"I love to dance," Beth answered, her face alight with anticipation. "But I've never danced much, either, or gone to parties. Mother always worried if I was out anywhere and then I never knew any young people very well."

"Jard doesn't dance much, either."

Did Theo only imagine Beth's face fell a little?

They both spied Susan. She had come in with her "older crowd" which affected indifference to the Commencement exercises but intended to enjoy the dance. Susan was with Henry Peters and Ossie Wil-

kins. She looked very pretty and animated and very conscious of her two swains.

"There's Susan!" Beth had spied her first. "Doesn't she look darling?"

Theo never had thought of Susan looking "darling". Especially when she was with Hank Peters and Ossie Wilkins who was as silly as Hank.

"I'd love to have a sister—an older one," Beth went on, without waiting for Theo to agree that Susan looked darling. "You don't know—" Beth's voice was unsteady with feeling, "you don't know how *horrid* it is to be an only child!"

Susan joined them before Theo could digest that. "Well, how did you like Commencement?" she asked Beth. "Where are the boys? Why do you keep Beth here in a corner, Theo? Everyone wants to meet her." Susan turned to the faithful Henry. "Do bring up some of the boys to meet Miss Bradford, Henry."

Theo, nettled by Susan's frown, thought: "She wants Beth to see how she can order that simp of a Hank around."

Susan caught Jard's eye and beckoned him to their corner. And Phil followed. Soon, under Susan's adroit engineering, there was a little circle of young people around them and older folks, too, for they were not unmindful of the opportunity to meet the Bradford girl.

Beth was explaining to Mrs. Clapp, in a pretty manner, that her mother was so sorry not to be able

to receive callers. And to Mrs. Morrisey, who was famous for her sponge-cake, Beth said sweetly: "Mamma appreciated so much your sending her that lovely cake. She'll tell you so herself when she is better."

"I sort o' figgered what with settling that big house and everything you wouldn't have time to bake," Mrs. Morrisey explained coloring with pleasure.

Susan tried to hear every word everyone said. Theo imagined that she could see Susan's ears actually wiggling. She herself, unwillingly, admitted a little wonder that Beth knew just what to say to each person and could say it so easily.

The orchestra, made up of students, struck up a dance tune and Susan nodded meaningly to Jard, behind Beth's back. His face very red, Jard led Beth out upon the floor. Susan whirled off with Henry Peters. Phil was left with Theo.

"Want to dance?" he asked uncertainly.

"Me? I should say not," Theo retorted promptly.

"Guess I'll ask Sue Meade." And Phil walked off unceremoniously.

Maintaining a scornful attitude, Theo watched the revelry. Cutting-in and stag lines were not the custom in Merridam; the girls always outnumbered the boys at any kind of a party and now those who had no partners sat on the outer row of the seats where they had been pushed aside, giggling and

chattering. Some of the girls danced together. Not all of the boys danced; some stood in the door bashfully watching. Some of the older men and women danced, too. Lucy Maple was whirling around with Cy Dark, who'd been "keeping company" with Lucy off and on since they'd been in school together. Mrs. Morrisey was dancing, her round face a little purple with the unwonted exercise.

Theo watched Jard and Beth. "He stepped on her foot *that* time," she thought with savage joy. If Jard knew how silly he looked! Jard, who, like herself, thought dancing silly. But he actually looked as if he were enjoying it now. And what was Beth saying to him that made him laugh? Theo looked quickly away, all at once sharply jealous. If Jard was going to get like all the other boys ——

Phil was dancing with Sue. They were laughing over something. Susan whirled by with Hank Peters, dancing with the peculiar droop she had acquired in her year at State Normal. Silly! Silly! "You wouldn't catch *me* out there," Theo muttered aloud. No, she'd stick in her corner even if she went to sleep, waiting.

When the dance ended a little bevy of boys gathered around Jard and Beth. Jard gave her over to Phil and sauntered toward the door. He'd forgotten Theo.

The young musicians scraped and beat with zealous enthusiasm. The dancers moved to the music's

rhythm with happy abandon. There was a great deal of laughter and occasionally couples shouted something to other couples.

After her third dance Beth joined Theo. "It's fun!" she cried breathlessly. "Everyone is so nice."

When Henry Peters came to ask Beth to give him the next dance she turned, hesitating, to Theo. But Theo nodded. "Oh, go ahead. I'm all right."

But after Beth had gone she felt suddenly lonely and conscious of her aloofness. It *did* look like fun—sort of —— Even the girls who were not dancing every dance seemed to be having a good time. Maybe, if—if someone would ask her—Jard—or Phil ——

But no one asked her for no one noticed her in her corner, excepting Susan who frowned at her, as she passed by.

Theo was glad when refreshments were served. Jard and Beth came for her and they ate their ice-cream together, with Phil and Sue Meade. The others laughed a great deal over it though Theo's laugh was a little forced. She still felt awkward and out of it.

It was Beth who declared she must go home. "Mamma cannot sleep if I am not in the house," she apologized. "I don't like to take the rest of you away ——" But Theo was ready to go.

As they moved toward the door they met Joe Brace coming in from the hall. He ignored Jard and

Theo and Phil but he stood squarely in front of Beth. "Give me this dance?" he asked boldly.

Beth's chin lifted ever so slightly. "We are going home." She didn't say she was sorry or even smile and Theo saw a dull red mount over Joe's face. Impulsively she slipped her hand through Beth's arm and squeezed it.

"He's the boy who read the essay, isn't he?" Beth whispered. "I don't like him."

In her gratitude to Beth for the snub she'd given Joe Brace, Theo forgot the trials of the evening—for a time.

CHAPTER XIII

SUSAN had kept in mind Beth's plea for a picnic. The Commencement party a success—from her viewpoint—she turned at once to other plans.

"We can go up the river to the Island. You," to Theo, "and Jard and Beth and maybe Phil can go in Jasper's boat—and Dad and I'll drive up and you can ferry us across."

Susan had spoken with a determined tone in her voice as if she expected opposition but Theo made none for the word picnic in itself always stirred her.

A picnic, even with Beth Bradford along, was a picnic, nevertheless.

"Petunia can fry chicken and make rolls and a cake and some lemonade and if Mr. Bradford should go it would be nice to build a fire and make coffee."

"I'll get ahold of Phil ——" Jard volunteered. That meant Jard wanted a picnic with the Bradfords. Theo considered that with a little sharp surprise. Jard—who'd always shrunk so from strangers. But of course Beth wasn't a stranger now; Jard had danced with her and though he'd stepped all over her he'd seemed to enjoy it and Beth had, too, for they'd laughed together and talked. Jealousy stabbed again, as Theo thought of that.

Theo had not gone to bed at once, after the Commencement dance. In her room she had faced herself in the glass with grim appraisal. The sober, dark face displeased her. She seemed to see Beth's, too, reflected there, alight with pleasure as it had been at the dance and she scowled at the contrast. Beth, knowing no one, had found it "fun", while she, knowing everyone, had sat in a corner. That was the kind of a girl she was—a wall-flower. She knew the term from Susan. She was like the weeds that sometimes grew tall and ugly among Dad's bright flowers. Just like. Even the new dress with its ruffle and belt wouldn't make her look like Beth ——

When Susan talked about what she was going to wear to the picnic Theo listened scornfully. Bothering about what one would wear to a *picnic!* But underneath the scorn she knew an altogether unfamiliar yearning, herself, for what Susan called the right kind of "sport clothes". Susan had come back from the State Normal with a fine discrimination in the matter of clothes which Theo, hitherto, had thought very silly but which now seemed to mean something to her. Dressing for the picnic, she donned the old knickers and blouse she always wore on her tramps and picnicking, but with none of her old joy in their comfort.

Theo and Jard and Phil and Beth were to meet Susan at the library. Susan had arranged with Lucy Maple to relieve her at four o'clock. The library

held a conspicuous place on Merridam's four-corners —opposite the Bank and the Post-office and next to Merridam's dry-goods store, and everyone anywhere near the four-corners must see them start forth in the Ford with Beth Bradford with them and all the baskets and Phil's banjo. Susan had suggested that Phil take it along. Theo thought Susan wanted everyone to see them starting off with Beth because Susan had announced the plan directly after Petunia told them that everybody was talking about "how thick the Waring girls were with the new Bradford girl." Petunia had attended a meeting of the Maccabees the night before. "I heard Lizzie White sayin' to Mis' Maple she didn't see why the Bradford girl took up with that harum-scarum Theo Waring and was it true that the Waring young one'd tried to pick a fight with Joe Brace and called him awful names and I spoke up and says it ain't likely to be true else that nice Bradford girl wouldn't be thick as pea soup with our Theo, like she is, would it?" Petunia was immensely pleased with her retort. "Lizzie White looked properly cheap, she did, if you ask me."

Susan was pleased with Petunia's answer, too. Theo colored hotly, listening, but she made no comment. Somehow that encounter seemed not to count because of Merridam gossip but because it had roused the spleen which later led Joe Brace to steal Jard's

essay. It even didn't matter now to Theo that folks were saying she'd *tried* to fight Joe Brace.

Beth arrived ten minutes after the appointed hour. "At the last moment mother fussed," she explained with that little shrug of her shoulder that was so grown-up. A faint irritation lingered with her obvious eagerness for the picnic.

It went ahead according to Susan's schedule. Jard drove them back across the bridge and on up to Jasper's landing. Then Susan was to return, pick up Dr. Waring and Mr. Bradford and drive up the road on the other side of the river to a point opposite the Island, where Theo would meet them and ferry them over.

Jasper was sunning himself, humped on the rough bench outside his door. He greeted the young people with twinkling eyes. Theo had asked for the use of the boat in advance and it was plain that he felt extremely flattered that they wanted it. He shambled down to the landing, with painful slowness, to start them off.

"Better let the gal do the scullin'," he warned with a chuckle and a broad wink at Theo.

Theo had intended to scull. But when Jasper said that she saw a dull color mount up over Jard's face. Instinctively she shielded him from his embarrassment. "Jard's going to do the work!" she answered promptly. She sprang nimbly into the bow and waved to Beth to take the next seat.

Beth sat down carefully. When the boat listed a little under Phil's careless step she clutched the sides and laughed nervously. "Oh, this old tub can't tip over," Theo assured her. But Jasper had called out a sharp: "Look out thar, young fellar," to Phil.

Susan waved them off and stood with Jasper until a bend in the river took them out of sight. Beth tried to appear at ease, though she kept tight hold of the side of the boat. "Is it far?" she asked. Then, lest Theo think she did not want it to be far she added: "I think this is fun ——"

The spring floods had ebbed leaving a little current which rippled the surface of the water. Trees fringed the banks and the winding course opened new vistas of meadows and hills, one after the other.

Theo and Jard knew every turn in the river, every tree along its banks. The Island whither they were bound was a treasure place of their own—they had picnicked there innumerable times, sometimes just the two of them, sometimes with some of their schoolmates. There should be nothing out of the ordinary today for Theo—yet there was. First she thought it was Beth, with them. Of course it was that. And then, she knew it was Jard who was different. For one thing, Jard was sculling. And he hated it, she knew.

She watched him, curiously, a little apprehensively, Theo, who had always trusted Jard. He looked different—there was a little defiance on his face. And

something else—Jard was showing off, before Beth and Phil and her. That was it. He hadn't liked Jasper's telling her to take the oar, in front of Beth. But he was managing beautifully, Theo admitted with her old pride in Jard. He swung the boat around the sharpest curve with apparent ease.

Two miles beyond the landing the river widened and divided around the little Island. A sandy beach at the end of the Island made a safe and convenient landing place. Years ago Jasper had helped Jard and Theo build a lean-to which had withstood the high waters. They had made trails through the little forest of trees which grew on the Island.

Beth's relief at reaching the Island sent her spirits soaring. She wanted to see everything at once. They postponed the serious business of gathering firewood to explore the trails and find what nests were in Jard's birdhouses and the cave which had hidden pirates' treasure, really and truly, once upon a time. Smugglers had come up from the Sound and hidden their loot on the Island. Jard told the story.

They initiated Beth into one of their "games"—a race through the trails, each taking a different direction at the start and finishing at the beach. "If you get lost—just yell and we'll rescue you." Beth became hopelessly lost and "coo-hooed" lustily and Theo found her and guided her, running fleetly, so that they reached the beach before Jard or Phil.

Breathless from their race, the four of them sat

on the beach, to wait for the others, coming in the Ford. They were hungry and happy. Theo had forgotten that she ever had "hated" Beth, she'd forgotten that Jard had tried to "show off", she was the Theo of every other care-free summer, her slim length stretched out lazily, her freckled face turned toward the sun.

Presently a familiar honk across the river announced the arrival of the Ford. When Theo sprang up and ran to the boat Jard made no protest. He and Phil began to gather firewood and Theo, as she swung out from shore, noticed that Beth was helping them.

Mr. Bradford proved as enthusiastic a picnicker as Beth. He admitted that it had been years and years since he'd done anything like it—that coffee never had tasted like this—perhaps it was the sand that had got into it that gave it its magic flavor?

Theo noticed how he watched Beth, a pleased look in his eyes, how he smiled when Beth laughed, as if her laughter meant something very special to him. And Theo remembered the little irritation Beth had shown when she'd joined them. There was no smallest trace of it now! She remembered, quite irrelevantly, Beth's half-frightened manner that day they had gone to the Bradfords' house. She felt sorry, again, for Beth. Why, picnics like this, fun like this, always had been just an accepted part of

her life and yet it was all new and exciting to this other girl!

When Theo was ferrying Susan and Dad and Mr. Bradford and the empty baskets back to the Ford she heard Mr. Bradford say to Dad: "I am very grateful to your young people for this." He said it very seriously and Theo knew he was thinking of Beth. "It rewards me for coming to Merridam."

Would Jard want to scull back? Theo hesitated before taking her seat. "Get in," commanded Jard, masterfully.

Now Beth showed no uneasiness. Theo made her take the seat in the bow. Phil sat in the next and Theo behind him. As they went down the river Phil began to strum on his banjo. "Way down upon the Swannee River ——" Theo and Phil sang. Beth listened, a soft raptness in her eyes. And when Theo and Phil had finished she suddenly began a little French song, shyly, ending with a laugh.

"Why, *Beth!*" For even to Theo's untrained ear, the notes had been of exquisite sweetness.

When they begged her to sing another she shook her head, soberly. "No—no." And all the gaiety had gone for a moment from her face.

Jasper was waiting for them. As Jard awkwardly essayed swinging the boat up to the landing, Phil sprang carelessly to his feet and reached out to catch at the nearest plank. At the same moment, Jard, startled perhaps at the sudden tipping of the boat,

gave a quick awkward twist of the oar which swung the boat sharply about; Beth, who had half-risen, swayed and fell over the side.

In an instant Theo was in the water and had caught Beth and brought her to the side of the boat. "Hang on," she commanded. Jasper was swearing loudly and in the same voice directing Jard. "Catch this, you ——" He had held out a long pike pole. With the boat close to the landing it was a simple matter for the two girls to clamber up to safety.

Jasper ordered them to walk off at once. The sun was low and the water had a chill. As Beth's teeth were chattering it seemed sound advice and the four started down the road to meet Susan with the Ford.

Beth laughed off the incident as nothing at all. "A ducking won't hurt me." But Theo did not laugh. Duckings were familiar things to her, rarely accidents, and there had been no danger, for the water at the landing was not over Beth's head, but it was Jard's face that frightened her. She had seen it dark with terror, and angry, too, as it had looked that day when she'd fallen out of the tree.

He was stalking along a little behind them, tight-lipped and scowling. "Oh, Jard," thought Theo in a distress as great as his, fighting back the fear in her heart.

CHAPTER XIV

I'M AS right as can be—haven't even the littlest sniffle," Beth reported the next day. "Mamma doesn't know what happened and all father said was that I must learn to swim."

A load of apprehension was lifted from Susan's and Theo's minds, Susan's, because she had worried lest Mr. Bradford forbid Beth's going on any more such picnics with them, Theo's, because she had dreaded, on Jard's account, any questioning into what had happened.

She had tried to dismiss it from her own thoughts. "It could have happened if I'd had the oar," she told herself stoutly. "It was Phil's fault—clumsy thing."

She had to admit that Beth had been very game about it. She had to admit a warm respect for that gameness. And she had to admit that Beth had been the life of the picnic, prettier than ever, with the warm color on her cheeks and the bright glow in her eyes.

Two days later Beth appeared at the house. It was a rainy day—since morning the rain had beaten in little gusts against the windows and rattled on the roofs.

"I was bored to death at home," she acknowledged. "Mamma isn't well and the house seemed so empty." There was the little wistful tone in her voice with which Theo was becoming familiar. "I thought you wouldn't mind if I came over."

Theo herself had been bored by her enforced confinement. Petunia had given her various small tasks "to keep her out of mischief" but these had not enlivened her. The moment before Beth appeared at the door she had been wondering disconsolately what she'd do next.

She was taken back at Beth's unexpected coming. Without Susan to command the situation she felt awkward and stiff. But Beth appeared unaware of it and to find nothing lacking in the warmth of Theo's greeting. When Theo said: "There isn't anything to do," Beth answered brightly: "Oh, it's something just to talk."

Theo never had practiced the art of conversation. She talked when she wanted to say something; sometimes she chattered like a magpie and at other times she was as silent as Jard in his spells. But to *make* talk, to pass a rainy day sitting and talking as Petunia might, or Susan, was new and a little embarrassing to Theo. Not so to Beth, trained by her varied associations with strangers, rarely speaking her own tongue, sometimes French, sometimes Italian, sometimes German, depending on whatever baths or doctors appealed to her mother at the time.

And Beth was starved for young companionship, for little confidences with girls of her own age, to make them and receive them. It had not been possible with the schoolmates in the French school at Fontainebleau or the private classes of Frau Federlein in Munich—or any of the young people she met here and there on their wanderings and the lack of it had made her lonely and wistful.

Her own heart surcharged with a load of unspent friendliness, she never had sensed Theo's antagonism. A starving person does not look closely into the quality of the food put before him! Theo was young and her unaffected youth attracted Beth, as did the old Waring house that was so much a home to the girl who had had no home. Both had drawn her to them this day when the emptiness of the Center Street house weighed on her with an unbearable loneliness.

The old, comfortable house *was* a pleasant place on this rainy day, with Petunia bustling in the kitchen, with the smell of fresh-baked bread, with the loud tick of the grandfather's clock in the hall.

"We might make fudge," Theo exclaimed suddenly.

So they made fudge, as Theo and Jard, or Theo and Madie Clapp had done innumerable times on a rainy day. And, making the fudge, Theo was at ease and Beth gay and Petunia less watchful than usual

for messes on her shining stove and the spotless oil-cloth of her table.

They took the fudge into the parlor to eat it—Petunia bade them take it there. She was to tell about it at the next meeting of the Maccabees. Now and then she peeked in to enjoy the sight of Beth Bradford, curled at one end of the old sofa, devouring the fudge ——

"Oh, I'm glad I came! I hope you are. This is fun!" How often Beth said that, and always with that little eager tone in her voice as though fun of any kind was rare to her.

They talked, and now Theo as much as Beth, about little trivial things that were important only because they built toward a mutual understanding. They agreed on liking certain things and disliking others.

They talked about the picnic. Beth's eyes glowed as they had that day. "You can't know how father and I enjoyed it. It was—why, it was so different. Father said we enjoyed it because it was so spontaneous—so real. He used to do things like that when he was a boy. Simple, jolly things. He wouldn't let that silly mishap spoil it, either, though we agreed we mustn't tell mamma about it. I won't be so clumsy, next time."

Then Beth didn't blame Jard, or even Phil! Theo had held her breath for a moment and then let it escape in a little sound of relief.

"I told father how you jumped in after me. He said that was just what he'd expect from a girl like you."

Theo flushed with pleasure at the tribute even while she answered carelessly: "Oh, I was nearest to you. That wasn't anything."

They talked about school and Theo confided to Beth how she'd always hated it. She admitted her sorry failure in two of her examinations. "I'm very stupid," Beth admitted, apparently eager to share with Theo her inaptitude for study. "Father's wondering what he'll do about my education, now—here. He said something about tutoring but I don't think I'd like that. I'm so tired of tutors. But maybe he'll send me away somewhere and I wouldn't like that, either. Unless—I wish——" Beth always stopped excitedly before one of her "wishes". "I wish we might *both* go away to school!"

To go away to school never had crossed Theo's imagining or desires. Merridam girls did not "go away" to school, except a few, after graduating from the Merridam High, as Susan had gone to the State Normal. And Merridam girls did not have "tutors", either. But the way Beth had put it made it sound attractive and made Theo forget that only a little while back she had "hated" this Beth Bradford.

While they talked Beth's eyes had gone again and again to the old square piano. And presently, quickly,

as if yielding to an irresistible impulse, she crossed the room to it and touched the keys.

"Don't you play?" Theo remembered Beth's voice as she had sung, coming down the river.

"No," Beth answered in a queer tone. Then she flung her head back, defiantly. "Oh, yes, I play a little." She sat down on the creaking stool and held her hands over the yellowed keys for a fraction of a moment. There was a strange mingling of fear and delight on her face. And then she played.

It was a simple melody, something even Susan could play with her limited ability. But Beth's touch made it different, and the odd expression on her face.

With the last note she let her hands fall into her lap and dropped her head down to the old piano with a little sob.

"Why, Beth ——" Theo cried, awkwardly.

"Oh, I shouldn't have done it! I've broken a promise," Beth said in a low, unhappy voice. "I promised Mamma ——" She sprang up and went back to the sofa. She tried to laugh though tears were still in her eyes. "Mamma cannot bear music. It makes her—creep. She was terribly angry when she found out Frau Federlein had been giving me lessons. She was sick afterwards. That was when she made me make the promise. I thought she was going to die. And, Theo—I'd rather play and sing than anything else! I get just the most unendurable *long-*

ing to make music. It seems right, too. I'm sorry I made the promise—but I did."

"Maybe, now your mother's better, she'll let you take it back," Theo offered, moved to consolation by Beth's sorry face.

Beth gave the little shrug of her shoulders that was her only affectation. "I don't know whether she's better or not. Theo—I'm awful, I know I am, but sometimes I wonder if mamma's really sick. I've wanted, oh, hundreds of times, to ask my father if he thought so, and I haven't dared—I guess for fear he'd tell me he didn't think she was, either. And that would make it so dreadful—we couldn't feel sorry for her, then, or keep patient. I wish—I'm just praying that your father will make her well. Someway."

"I'll bet he can," Theo assured her stoutly. And Theo's confidence cheered Beth at once.

"I'm really shameless—everytime I break my promise I try to be sorry that I did and I can't. I know I'm going to break it again, too. I've just *got* to. Mamma was unreasonable about it—but, then, she's unreasonable about everything and nothing I ever do quite pleases her. You see mother wanted me to be a boy. She had a twin brother—and he died. And when I was born she prayed I'd be a boy. She was going to name me the same name as her brother. She wouldn't even look at me for weeks and weeks, afterwards. Jeannette told me that. Jeannette's been

with her ages. I'm sure mamma cares more for Jeannette now than she does for me."

There was a tinge of bitterness in Beth's tone. And Theo could give her no comforting assurance on that point.

"I haven't talked like this to a soul, before," Beth admitted with a little shaky laugh. "And it seems good to tell someone." She reached out and caught Theo's hand and squeezed it. "You don't think I'm horrid, do you?"

Theo shook her head. She was embarrassed by Beth's revelations—that this girl whom she had held, with some resentment and pity for her own short-lived dream of blossoming, as perfect should admit to shortcomings and the need to unburden her little doubts and injuries, startled her even while it won her.

Geoffrey at the door interrupted any further confidences.

"Mrs. Bradford is asking for you, Miss Beth. You'd best hurry."

Theo saw Beth's expression change, anxiety and alarm leaping instantly to her face. "Oh, I've loved it—this afternoon," she said quickly, slipping into her rain-coat. "I've loved—*everything*." She gave emphasis to the last word and Theo did not know whether she meant playing the piano or telling something of her secrets. "I'm coming again."

It was Petunia who told Susan that Beth had been

at the house. Susan turned to Theo. "Why didn't you say something about it? Did you ask her to come? Did she stay all afternoon? What did you do?"

"Oh—just talked."

"Just *talked?* What did you talk about?" Susan's curiosity gave her voice a sharp edge.

"Oh, not about anything much."

And Susan could not read behind Theo's mask of indifference to know that she was guarding a secret!

"I suppose you weren't even civil," Susan exclaimed, exasperated. "I wish I'd been home. I'd have found out a few things. The Bradfords are nice but I believe there's something funny about them. Mrs. Forman told Lucy Maple that if anyone else in Merridam shrieked around the way Mrs. Bradford does some of the time she'd be shut up in the asylum at Stockton!"

CHAPTER XV

WHAT Beth had told Theo, that rainy afternoon, put their acquaintance on a new basis. Beth had opened to Theo a shut-up corner of her heart and poured out its secret. Theo held that secret now in her keeping, to guard. Just so has many a friendship formed against greatest odds!

She had defended Beth's secret from Susan's prying curiosity as staunchly as she would have defended some intimate confidence of Jard's. And that she had done it gave her a sense of warm satisfaction. Susan wasn't going to get anything out of *her*. All the Lucy Maples in Merridam might chitter-chatter but she wouldn't tell them anything.

Theo had not wanted to be friends with Beth Bradford; circumstances, abetted by Susan's scheming, had forced Beth on her but with that Theo had not felt any sympathy or understanding or interest that go to make up friendship. Until now —— And now she was aware of all those qualities of feeling. She was sorry for Beth and resented hotly that promise Mrs. Bradford had exacted of her. It wasn't fair—just because it gave Mrs. Bradford the creeps! Imagine Dad making her or Susan or Jard promise not to do something, like playing the piano. And

with her sympathy was a great curiosity over Beth's situation, which Beth had not entirely explained. She must tell her more, someday. She would.

Possibly what had beaten down Theo's stand against Beth was the amazing revelation that Beth was very human, after all, in spite of her outward perfection. Beth had confessed herself as horrid.

Hitherto Theo had given little heed to the complications of human living. And now she was thinking a great deal about them. Beth's mother, maybe loving Jeannette more than her own daughter, and poor Beth, going around on tiptoe. Jard, and her worries over him. Susan—even Susan she considered, with a new perception. Susan wasn't just *acting* grown-up, she really *was* grown-up, now, and perhaps she wasn't as silly as Theo had thought she was. Why, she'd be twenty-one next October and when you were twenty-one it *did* matter what sort of clothes you wore and whether you had "company" in the evening or found the evening desolate on your hands.

Twenty-one! Theo tried to picture herself at that advanced age. Of course she wouldn't be pretty like Susan, so she wouldn't bother about what things were becoming and what were not and beads and bracelets and high heels on your pumps. Not *likely*, black flower that she'd be! But what would she be like at twenty-one? It gave her a moment's alarm, as if her thought caught her unready. And what would Jard be at twenty-one? And Beth?

Well, for one thing twenty-one mustn't find her still in the Merridam school, or a know-nothing like the Alport girl who'd left school after the seventh grade. Theo dusted her despised Latin and history books and—in secret—began a review of them. It was more haphazard than comprehensive, but it gave her a feeling of well-doing, new to her and therefore stimulating.

The second week of vacation Jard told his family that he had a job. He said it a little defiantly. He did not look at his father while he told of his job. He was going to work in the Gazette office.

The Gazette was Merridam's weekly newspaper, which disseminated all the county happenings from the newest baby to the newest barn. It also published reprints from the Stockton Bee. James Dorrance was owner and publisher and editor and advertising manager. He had bought a third-hand printing press and set it up in an old house on Main Street and when he was not printing his news sheet he turned out bill posters and tax notices and invitations for the Maccabees and the Grange and the various church societies.

"Oh, I'll only do odd jobs around," Jard explained. "Mr. Dorrance said he guessed he could keep me busy."

"If you ask me I'll say I can keep you as busy as Jim Dorrance can," Petunia retorted promptly.

"How much will you get?" Susan asked.

"Ten dollars a week—at first."

John Waring only said: "Well, it'll keep you out of mischief, son." And Theo, suddenly wished Dad had said something more—or different. For one thing Jard never got into mischief and for another she sensed that Jard had wanted Dad to say more. Theo had caught a note of pride behind Jard's defiance. Jard wasn't telling them everything.

After supper she followed him out to the porch and sat down beside him on the low step. Her heart was beating a little fast in its yearning for Jard's confidence.

"I think it's wonderful—what you're going to do," she said softly. Would he tell her? Would he tell her? She dug her fingers into her palms in her longing.

"Oh, it isn't anything. An errand boy, sort of ——" But Jard's eyes had their nice shine. And then, after a moment: "Old Dorrance says that if business keeps up like it is now he's got to take on a reporter. Someone to go out and get the news for him and write it up. That's what I want to do. I can do it after school, too. But don't you tell anyone, Theo. Mind you don't."

As if she would! Had she ever betrayed Jard's confidences? Those old happy secrets, which were about nothing at all, compared to this. A reporter. She didn't know anything about it but it sounded very important—and Jard wanted it.

"I won't have time now for fooling around. Dorrance'll keep me busy, all right. Told me to get there at eight every morning and no knowing when he'll let me go. Saturdays, too."

No more gypsying, no more fishing or exploring the woods and river, no more of the happy, careless: "Come on, Jard, let's ——" Jard had a job, just like a man. Theo felt a moment's sadness, the foreshadowing of separation, but she forgot it almost at once in an exulting sense of a restored rightness in things. Jard had told her what he wanted to do—and he hadn't told anyone else!

He began work the next day. Theo waved him off after an early breakfast and met him before anyone else on his return. "How did it go?" she begged excitedly. It seemed as if she'd been waiting all day for the moment of his answer.

Jard's day had been long and had included tasks ranging from washing out the spittoon at Jim Dorrance's desk to collecting a bill for advertising from the Dry Goods Emporium. The newspaper offices were indescribably littered and dirty and Jim Dorrance had hinted that a part of Jard's duties was to keep them swept up. He hadn't felt very important. The typesetter, while they ate their lunch in the cindered space by the side of the office, had hinted broadly that he wasn't likely to stay long, "they" never did. "The old man's a slave driver, he is, and he knows how to pinch a penny 'til it squawks."

But Theo's excited voice, her eager eyes, revived his dream. "Great," he declared with more enthusiasm than he usually expressed. He even regarded his very dirty hands with manful pride. "You ought to see the press, up close." He'd been allowed to go all over the place, he told Theo. On Thursday they'd get out the weekly edition, then things would hum. Maybe old Dorrance would let him help in the process.

"Did you write anything today?" Theo whispered.

Jard laughed loudly. "The first day? Not likely. But I'm going to—I'll keep my eyes open for something big and turn it in to Dorrance. Then he'll know I'm worth something more than sweeping up the place."

But Jard didn't say any of that to the others when they plied him with questions. He guessed he was going to like it, he told them.

Secrets. Secrets. Theo's heart was filled to bursting, with Beth's and now with Jard's. Telling Beth —for Beth came very soon again to the Waring house—about Jard's new job cost Theo conscious pain, it was so hard not to tell Beth all about it!

Beth revealed that she knew Jard was working at the Gazette office. Her mother, returning from a drive with Jeannette and Geoffrey, had seen Jard outside of the building and had told Geoffrey to stop the car. It was lunch-time and she had made Jard get into the car and go home with her. Beth laughed

as she told about it. Usually her mother ate her luncheon on a tray in her room, and scarcely anything at that, but she'd come home and told Thekla to serve lunch in the dining-room. And her mother'd been positively gay ——

"How ever did Jard act?" Theo asked with an alarm that made Beth look wondering.

"Why, he was as nice as could be. How did you think he'd act?"

"Oh, he's so shy and when he gets shy sometimes he acts—funny."

"Maybe he did feel shy at first but Mamma got him through it. She really was dear, Theo—just as if she wasn't ever—ever, well, anything else. You see it's her wanting a son," Beth sighed.

But she did not say anything more about that, to Theo's disappointment. Beth had found Theo shelling peas and insisted upon helping her.

"Father says I am to learn to swim—if you'll teach me," Beth announced. "He says you can teach me ever so many things," she added with a rueful laugh. "I didn't know there were so many things I couldn't do or didn't know about."

Theo scarcely took in this admission of ignorance for she was held by the prospect of teaching Beth to swim. It gave her a quite novel sense of importance and promised pleasant occupation.

"I'll have to run away for Mamma'd never let

me go if she knew what I was doing," Beth put in while they were making plans.

"Beth—" Theo exclaimed impulsively, "if you do things like *that*, without her knowing it, why can't you play the piano—and sing? As long as you do it without her hearing you so that she won't have the creeps, as you said."

Beth colored a little. "I've thought of that, often. But I don't suppose it's right, I did make that promise, you see. But it's nice of you to care about it, Theo."

"It seems all wrong," Theo blurted out, a little amazed that she did care about it.

"Well, everything's all wrong," Beth answered, shrugging her shoulders. "It's all wrong that father and I ever have to plan things and agree not to speak of them in front of mamma. We can't—because if we did she'd make me make more promises. My father doesn't know about that other one."

"Why don't you ask her to release you from it? I would."

Beth shook her head. "I've thought of that, too. But—I don't dare. I know just how it'd be, mamma'd only make me ashamed, make me feel that I'm selfish and indifferent to her. Oh, I guess it doesn't matter, anyway. Let's talk about something pleasanter."

But Theo knew, without Beth's saying, that it did matter. It was a situation strange to Theo's experi-

ence, and such as to hold her indignation. She hated to agree with Susan in anything she considered as silly on Susan's part, but she couldn't help thinking that there was something queer—"funny", she put it—about Mrs. Bradford.

This conviction led her—almost—into revealing Beth's confidence!

Her father told her he was glad to see that she and Beth were becoming such good friends. He'd come back from his round of country calls and found her and Beth together. And afterwards he'd said that. And Theo did not resent it or remember that that was what Susan and Dad had planned for her salvation.

"Dad, is—is Mrs. Bradford getting any better?" She'd asked it impulsively with more anxiety in her voice than she knew.

"Better?" Dr. Waring pondered it. "Yes, as far as her physical health is concerned, she is—better."

"What is the matter with her?"

He smiled half-quizzically at Theo. To his knowledge she'd never shown any curiosity in his "cases". And he was interested in her tone and in the little frown on her brow.

"Theo, will you hold it a careful secret if I tell you my diagnosis? It is not strictly professional, to tell you, you know. Mrs. Bradford, as I see it so far, is suffering principally from—selfishness. It centers attention upon her to be ill and she's worked

it so long and so thoroughly that now she really believes she is very, very ill—it's become a habit with her."

Theo uttered a little sound of astonishment that made Dad laugh.

"Oh, there are a great many sick people who are only sick in their minds," he told her.

"But—what do you do for them?"

"Well, if Mrs. Bradford were Mrs. Cobb who really does suffer from asthma but brings it on more frequently because she is always expecting it, I'd tell her to tie an apron around her and get at the washing or cleaning, or maybe fix up that desolate yard of theirs, get some flowers to blooming in it. But inasmuch as she is not Mrs. Cobb and has had dozens of doctors who know more than I do shaking their heads over her and ordering all sorts of new-fangled cures for her, I can't prescribe like that for her. I've gone along slowly to convince myself, first, that I am right in my diagnosis. Now I've got to make Dalton Bradford see that I am right." He was talking very gravely, now, seemed almost to have forgotten that it was Theo to whom he was talking. "I sometimes think there is something back of it all—some complexity that hasn't been told to me ——"

"She had a twin brother, who died," Theo burst in, impulsively, "and she was awfully disappointed

that Beth was a girl when she was born ——" And then Theo shut her lips tight, remembering.

Dr. Waring looked fixedly at Theo. "Ah, that's something! The poor, spoiled woman! Nursing her disappointment when she ought to be so happy with that lovely girl. It's an interesting case."

Theo did not think it interesting. She was thinking of poor Beth who was afraid to find out that her mother wasn't really sick and now here was Dad saying that was so.

"A very interesting case," Dr. Waring went on just as if Theo had agreed with him. "It's the kind I like to get my hands on. You see, child, there's a lot of suffering in this world which you can't reach with medicine or charity—that needs only understanding. It'd give me considerable satisfaction to help these Bradfords—to help them help themselves. It takes a sort of courage to face a situation like theirs —I think they've followed the easier way in a mistaken sense of kindness and loyalty. If I could persuade Mr. Bradford and Beth ——"

"Dad!" Oh, how Theo wanted to tell him about Beth's promise which she'd made because she thought her mother was very, very ill! She flushed at her impulsive word. "I was going to tell you something and I can't ——" she explained.

"That's fine, Theo. Guard a confidence. My dear, I believe together we can bring to those people something they miss. Mr. Bradford told me, after our

picnic, that he'd give almost everything he possessed to see his girl look like you. I don't think he meant freckles—I think he meant something deeper than looks at that."

This on top of Beth's saying almost the same thing embarrassed Theo so that she felt self-conscious and at a loss how to answer her father. And while she sat tongue-tied he took her hand and patted it.

"There have been some marvelous advances in the science of medicine, I'll admit, but at the same time I believe some of the good old practices are being lost. For one, an understanding of folks. Get that and you ease wounds that medicine cannot heal. I believe in that—that's why I've gone on here, like my father before me. And I'd like to think that Jard will go on after me. It was a dream of mine and your mother's, when Jard was a little baby. A very precious dream. We used to talk much about it. He may make his calls in an airplane where his granddad went around in a buggy and his great-granddad on horseback—but he'll heal. He'll rub down the sharp edges that hurt —— It's always seemed to me like a trust. There—I've let you into a part of my heart that I haven't opened since your mother left us."

Theo sat very still. Dad's voice made her want to cry, yet his face was not sad. He was smiling.

"*Doc*-tor! *Doc*-tor! *Tel*-e-phone!" shrilled Petunia from the house.

That meant that at once Dad would go off somewhere with his little shabby bag. He'd go somewhere where someone was sick and he'd make them feel better. Maybe he'd ease wounds that medicine wouldn't heal. Something in John Waring's patient service touched Theo, uplifted her, sent a faint tingling through her. And afterwards, when Dad was old, it would be Jard who'd go out when a call came, like Dad ——

CHAPTER XVI

IT WAS the old light-hearted Theo singing around the house those July days, banging doors, clattering down the stairs, two steps at a time.

"Land o' goodness, you'd think there was a dozen young uns around," Petunia sometimes grumbled, but the edge was missing from Petunia's grumblings. Now Petunia, like Susan, held Theo in new favor. Didn't she have something to tell the Maccabees each meeting? That the Bradford girl and Theo were off together somewhere most every day, that the Bradford girl ran into the house like she'd known the Warings all her life—that the Bradford girl had sat in the kitchen and et hot cookies out of the pan like any young one? That would hold Lizzie White's tongue awhile! Susan's favor was born of a satisfaction something like Petunia's. "Oh, yes, we see quite a bit of Beth Bradford. She and Theo are growing inseparable," she said, more than once, as she visited over the return or loan of a book. Susan felt that the increasing frequency of Beth's informal visits and telephone calls promised inseparability.

But it was not Petunia's and Susan's approval that made Theo burst sometimes into song. She gave as little thought to that as had the Theo of other sum-

mers. She was happy because the long days were full —and she had dreaded that they might be empty. And she was restored to her former place in Jard's confidence. She knew why he was working and no one else did. She was the sharer of Beth's secrets, too, the secrets of Beth's little trials and tribulations that no one would suspect, seeing her so outwardly poised and sweet and—perfect. And now Dad had told her something that he hadn't told anyone. Dad never had so honored her before; she supposed he'd told her because he saw that she could keep a secret. Her heart was thrillingly burdened.

"Dr. Jard Waring." She spoke the title, she wrote it down secretly and beamed proudly at its fine appearance. She didn't like to think of Dad being so old that he couldn't go around all day with his black bag—but it was nice to picture Jard doing it, too. He'd go away to college to study and then to some hospital, as Dad had done, and then he'd come back to the old house, like all the other Warings. And she'd keep house for him ——

The girls lost no time in beginning the swimming lessons. Geoffrey took them in the car about two miles up the river where a bend in the stream left a shelving basin of water. Geoffrey sat on the bank and watched, ready to jump in to Beth's rescue should the need arise. Beth's eagerness to master the proper strokes and more, to overcome her

timidity of the water, made her an easy pupil and Theo complimented her generously.

They visited Jasper more than once and Beth listened to some of Jasper's tales. Beth ventured out again in the old boat, watching Theo with admiring eyes as she dexterously managed the little craft. One day they went as far as the Island and wandered among the trails and climbed down the bank to peep into the old cave, made by the great twisting roots of the trees which hung out over the water.

They talked—and talked. There seemed to be no part of Beth's life she did not reveal to her new confidante. Paris. Frau Federlein's school and its walled yard that had had to serve for outdoor play. Other places that to Theo had been nothing but tiny dots on a map. And through all Beth's stories Theo caught that little wistfulness.

The day they had gone to the Island Beth spoke again of her mother. She spoke of her in connection with Jard, half-apologetically. "Poor Jard, if he ever knew how mamma's always looking for him! Geoffrey told me. She makes Geoffrey drive past the Gazette office every day, very slowly. She keeps asking me if I've seen him and why I don't bring him to the house. She told Jeannette—I heard her—that Jard made her think of her brother."

"What was her brother like?" Theo pressed, curiously.

"I don't know much about him. Mamma never

speaks of him and my father doesn't, very often. You see father never has seen him. His name was Charles. Sometimes I think something must have happened about him, something sad or unhappy, or—or maybe, disgraceful. It must be something like that, or why wouldn't mamma talk about him? It seems dreadful—if she loved him—not ever to mention him."

Theo considered that, with puckered brows. She remembered what her father had said—that there might be something behind Mrs. Bradford's condition. She felt a little tingle of excitement. To her knowledge there never had been a mystery in Merridam before and she welcomed the hint of one with all the avidness of any fifteen-year old enthusiast.

"Beth, why don't you try to find out? Maybe it has something to do with your mother being sick. You ought to know, anyway. Probably they haven't told you because they thought you were a kid. And you're not, now."

"I might ask my father. I never have. Somehow my father and I never talk about mamma's affairs. That's funny, too, isn't it? She hasn't any very near relatives—only distant cousins we've never seen. Her family were very rich once. They lived in a lovely old place in Maryland but it had to be sold and mamma went to New York. That was where my father met her."

But this was too meagre to build much on. Theo

repeated that Beth ought to find out more. And Beth said again that, maybe, she'd ask her father.

However she did not at once, and Theo did not urge her again, for other matters claimed her attention.

Each year the Girls' Society of the Baptist Church gave some sort of an entertainment, the proceeds of which went to the refurnishing of the church. Usually it was a lawn fête but this year someone suggested that they give a play. "It always rains when we plan a lawn fête and we've had so many."

The novelty of the play appealed to everyone. There had been no such amateur effort in Merridam for a long time and it was an opportunity to bring out latent talents. Susan was named as the chairman of the committee. After considerable discussion the committee chose "The Young Governess". It had high spots of melodrama and a little pathos and required only the one stage setting for the three acts. Its story was that of a proud old man who banished his only daughter from his home after a marriage that displeased him, only to find in his old age that he longs for her. To gladden the house that has become an empty sepulcher to him he invites the grandchildren of an old friend to visit him, who bring with them their governess. Her likeness to the disowned daughter startles proud old Philip Dangerfield. And one day he hears her singing at the piano a ballad that his daughter had sung to him in the

past. On questioning it is revealed to him that she is his grandchild and a beautiful reunion, eloquent with humility and forgiveness, ends the last scene.

The casting required more discussion. Young Dr. Pierce would be perfect in the old man's rôle. They all agreed on that, for every maiden of the First Baptist Church had felt a secret fluttering of her heart when Stanton Pierce joined the Church. But they did not agree on the rôle of Sylvia, the shabby governess. Lucy Maple thought she ought to take the part because she played the organ at the Church. Folks would expect her to take it. Molly Stevens reminded them that she had been in a play the year she'd been at State Normal. "Well, I was, too," Susan had answered to that. There threatened to be an embarrassing deadlock until Kate Clapp, thinking of the carpeting, suggested that it would be nice if Susan could get the Bradford girl to be "Sylvia". They all knew at once why it would be "nice".

Susan reported the discussion at the supper table. "Imagine Lucy Maple thinking she could be Sylvia! And Molly Stevens was dying to have it. But if Beth will take it, it's settled. You'll have to persuade her, Theo."

Susan already, in her mind, was telling the "girls" that Theo had *made* Beth say she'd be in the play.

It was not difficult to persuade Beth. "It will be fun," she said, yielding over her first hesitation. She'd been in a little play at Frau Federlein's. But

this would be much nicer. Theo was to have a part and at the last Jard consented to take the rôle of a servant. And young Dr. Pierce was to be the proud old man.

Rehearsals were held each evening, sometimes in the Sunday-school room, after which the entire cast would visit Warner's, to drink ice-cream-sodas, and sometimes at the Waring house, on Susan's argument that there was so much room there. Then the old house would ring with gay voices and laughter and Petunia would make a tub of lemonade and serve it with cookies to the greedy and thirsty young actors. Beth Bradford threw herself into her part with an enthusiasm and ability that inspired the others, even Theo. Theo, whose rôle was that of one of the youngsters under "Sylvia's" charge, something of a hoyden and a trial, had in all only a half-dozen lines to say but she went about the house intoning them with tragic seriousness. "Why, Theo," her father chuckled, "you need only be natural!" And she met that with silence for of course Dad didn't know how important even her few lines were.

"I love it," Beth confided to Theo. "I'll be sorry when it's over." And Theo felt that way, too, enjoying every moment of each rehearsal and a delightful prickling sensation at the thought of *the* moment, when the curtain would go up.

Beth and Theo had debated about the singing that came in Beth's part. "I shouldn't have taken it,"

Beth exclaimed, but something in her voice made Theo know that she was not sorry she'd done so. "This is different," Theo assured her. "*You're* not singing—it's Sylvia Stuyvesant, in the play. You can't help yourself." And this reasoning, the best she could trump up, had to quiet Beth's conscience.

Theo thought Beth sang beautifully. It was that old ballad of Civil War days, "Hard Times Come Again No More," and sometimes, listening, Theo wanted to cry, Beth's voice made it so sad. The others in the cast thought she sang it beautifully, too.

Theo wondered what might happen if Mrs. Bradford came to see the play! "I hope she does." Yet even as she said it she felt as Beth herself must feel, considering such a possibility.

But, of course, Mrs. Bradford wasn't likely to go.

CHAPTER XVII

BETH had had to reassure herself more than once that her mother was not likely to go to see the play. Mrs. Bradford had given little attention when Beth told her about it. If Beth dutifully presented herself before her mother once in the morning Mrs. Bradford was not interested in her goings and comings. Sometimes, when she was younger, Beth had tried to share with her mother some of her childish interests only to be reproved. "Don't you know that your chatter makes my head ache?" She rarely attempted it, now.

Sometimes, watching other girls with their mothers Beth had felt an overwhelming heartache; sometimes, watching them with their fathers had made her sad, too. "Everything's wrong," she had said truly to Theo. For though she knew her father loved her very much and that she loved him, they never talked about *every*thing—there was always a little holding-back between them.

The day of the dress rehearsal Mrs. Bradford, returning from her morning drive, spied Jard outside the Gazette office. It was not the second, nor the third time. On those occasions Jard had been able to say truthfully that he couldn't take more than time

to eat the lunch he'd brought with him. He was finding that Jim Dorrance *was* a hard taskmaster. But today his hesitation when Mrs. Bradford urged him to go home with her to lunch betrayed him. "Of course you can go. You must tell me about your work and about everything you are doing."

All the little criss-cross lines on her face seemed to smooth magically when Jard sat down beside her. She looked really pretty, sitting there in her corner. She patted Jard's arm affectionately. "You're too thin, lad. You're working too hard."

It happened that Theo had gone home with Beth that morning to superintend a "try on" of Beth's costume and Beth had urged her to remain for lunch. They had been in Beth's room, a pretty room and bright now with summer sunshine, and Theo had lost the feeling of awkwardness that had assailed her the few times she had been in the Bradford house. "Please stay, Theo. I'm at your house so much I'm ashamed. There'll just be the two of us—Father rarely comes home."

They had gone downstairs and were in the hall when Geoffrey drove in and they saw Jard sitting in the car with Mrs. Bradford. The same thought came to both of them and they exchanged glances of fear.

Theo had not seen Mrs. Bradford since the afternoon of Susan's tea-party. She felt shy and embarrassed and Mrs. Bradford's almost gay greeting did not put her at ease.

There was considerable scurrying in the region of the kitchen when Jeannette carried word there that luncheon was to be served for four in the dining-room. Theo, while they waited in the sun-porch, could hear quick footsteps back and forth and the rattle of dishes.

While they waited Mrs. Bradford did most of the talking and, if Theo had not been so concerned over the matter of the play, she might have marveled that Mrs. Bradford could be so like other folks. To be sure, she talked with Jard, and Theo could have marveled, too, over Jard's manner for the boy was not shy with Mrs. Bradford. But she didn't think of it then. She almost gave a gasp of relief when Thekla announced that luncheon was served.

It was a pretty luncheon, fine linen, delicate china and slender crystal goblets, a low bowl of flowers centering the table, delicious food served quietly, but Theo and Beth enjoyed no part of it. Theo was praying with each mouthful—and there were little intervals when she could not manage to get her food to her mouth; Beth looked disturbed and apprehensive. And after awhile just what the two girls feared happened. Jard, trying only to be polite, asked Mrs. Bradford if she were going to see the play.

"Play? What play?"

Jard flushed. He had caught Theo's reproachful

glance. "Why—the play we're all in. At the Church."

"Beth tells me nothing. When is it?"

"I did tell you, mamma, but you weren't interested. It's tomorrow night. It isn't anything ——" Beth's eyes filled with tears, for her mother's insinuation before Jard and Theo hurt her.

"*You* must tell me about it," Mrs. Bradford turned to Jard. And Jard, uncomfortable himself under a tension he felt but could not understand, told Mrs. Bradford briefly of the play. "Beth's great," he finished, enthusiastically, thinking that that would mollify Mrs. Bradford. "Especially in the last act when the old man goes in and finds her singing."

"*Singing?*" Mrs. Bradford echoed.

Theo shivered. Mrs. Bradford's voice made her shiver. She did not dare look at Beth. And Beth did not speak.

Jard answered Mrs. Bradford. He took the curious quality in Mrs. Bradford's voice for amusement, or perhaps doubt of Beth's ability. "Oh, she does it awfully well," he assured her.

But now Mrs. Bradford was deaf to Jard. She had pushed her plate away from her so quickly that it upset her cup and saucer. She stiffened in her chair until her diminutive figure took on height. Her eyes dilated. Theo, staring at her in fright-

ened fascination, thought she had never seen anyone look so angry—so stilly angry.

"Call—Jeannette!" Mrs. Bradford shrilled to Beth.

Beth did not need to call the faithful maid. She must have been behind the pantry door for she heard her mistress and came at once. And Mrs. Bradford threw herself, sobbing violently, into Jeannette's arms. Jeannette half-led her, half-carried her away. The young people could hear her wild weeping as the two went up the stairs.

They remained uncomfortably in their seats. Jard looked, puzzled and embarrassed, at Theo. And Theo looked at Beth.

Poor Beth's face was working in her effort to control her own tears. "Oh, I never should have been in the play," she cried in that low, half-frightened tone Theo had heard her use before, and unmindful of Jard's bewilderment.

Theo's indignation began to mount. "Well, she didn't say you *couldn't* ——" she muttered.

"But I can't—when it makes her sick. She—she hasn't had one of her crying spells for weeks! Now she'll be worse."

"But, Beth, you've *got* to! It's too late to back out. There isn't anyone to take your place ——"

"I can't! I can't!" Beth repeated. She sprang up and rushed toward the door, then turned and with a last desperate effort to hold on to herself, smiled

wanly at Jard. "I'm ever so sorry all this has happened, just now, Jard. Will you—will you—excuse it?"

"I guess we'd better go," Jard said to Theo as Beth fled from the room.

"I guess we *will*," Theo retorted, stormily. In her concern for the fate of the play she had no room for any sympathy for Beth.

She stalked down the walk to the street with Jard, her head held at a belligerent angle. Beth was going to spoil everything, now! Why, who *was* there to step in at the last moment and play the part of Sylvia?

Late in the afternoon Geoffrey brought a note to Theo from Beth—a rather pathetic little note though Theo threw it down with an exclamation of disgust after she had read it.

"I know you will think I'm just a goose but I cannot be in the play. Mamma sent for me and reminded me of my promise. I should not have needed reminding. It is all my fault. Will you explain it to Susan? And please, *please* don't feel as angry at me as you looked when you went away from the house. I'm sending Sylvia's costume with this ——"

Theo told Susan at supper time. In her hard mood she relished Susan's indignation with satisfaction. But Susan's reaction was short-lived, for when Theo demanded: "Who's *going* to be Sylvia?" Susan, her

face glowing with pleasure, answered at once: "I can. I know every word of Sylvia's lines."

Susan had attended every rehearsal, as one of the play committee. At the library she had learned "Sylvia's" role, not so much from any apprehension that Beth might fail them as to nurse her conviction that she could do it better than Beth. Possibly there was another reason—it had brightened dull moments of the working day to pretend she was Sylvia, standing before the handsome (or at least Susan thought he was handsome) Stanton Pierce, in that last act. "You are my daughter's child," and Stanton Pierce was putting his arm affectionately around *her* shoulder, not Beth's.

"*You* can!" But Theo suddenly knew Susan could and felt a little rush of pride in Susan, new to her. Susan could step in and save the day!

No wireless apparatus was needed in Merridam to broadcast the word that Beth Bradford wasn't going to be in the play because at the last moment her mother wouldn't let her! And on the same invisible wave went the news that Susan Waring was taking her part and doing it well. Of course Lucy Maple and Molly Stevens did not admit that, but Stanton Pierce said so to everyone, enthusiastically.

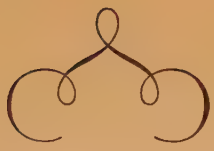
And on the day of the play everyone in Merridam knew that Dalton Bradford had stopped at the library and left with Susan a check big enough to buy *two* carpets for the Sunday-school room. Susan

had given the little slip of paper to the treasurer of the Girls' Society but not before ever so many had seen it, with its generous three figures.

The Sunday-school room under the church was packed. The play went ahead with only the usual difficulties of the improvised curtains sticking, a few properties disappearing and a few lines escaping the young actors' memories. Theo said the wrong thing in the wrong place but except for a little titter from the front row no one minded it. Susan, looking very pretty as Sylvia, and on her mettle, won hearty applause and her "Hard Times Come Again No More" was quite as plaintive as Beth's.

The audience had not settled down to the pleasant occupation of listening until the first act was over, for heads *would* turn to the door to see if, perhaps, some of the Bradfords might not come!

But neither Beth nor her father came.



CHAPTER XVIII

"THEO, may I come over?" Beth had begged over the telephone. And Theo had assented, though not warmly.

It was the day after the play. Theo was a little let-down and sad that it was all over. She was not inclined to return to her schoolbooks which had been neglected while the rehearsals were in progress. She missed Jard. She missed Beth, too, though she would not admit that, for, notwithstanding Susan's triumph, she still felt angry that Beth had deserted the cast.

However, by the time Beth reached the house her mood had softened; after all, poor Beth had been the one to miss the big moment of the fun.

When Beth appeared Theo knew at once that she had something to tell. Her face was pale and her manner constrained. In a low tone she asked Theo if they couldn't go out in the garden, but, seated in the swing, she begged Theo to tell her everything about the play, and Theo, while she told everything, very willingly, wondered why she'd had to go into the garden to do it.

Quite excusably Theo dwelt on Susan's achievement.

Beth gave a small sigh, but when Theo looked at her she knew the sigh was for something more than envy of Susan.

"Theo, I know—about my Uncle Charles."

Theo forgot the play, Susan, her grievance against Beth. "You do!" she cried with an eagerness that was in odd contrast to Beth's sober face.

Beth nodded. "I asked father. You made me do it. I saw the disgusted way you looked when you walked away from the house—day before yesterday. I'd heard the door close and I'd gone to the window. And that was worse than giving up the play. I kept thinking and thinking about it and finally I talked to my father. We talked—oh, way into the night. I think he was glad to talk to me, Theo. Poor father."

But Theo was not interested in poor father. She waited, taut with suspense, fearful that perhaps Beth wasn't going to tell her any more than that she knew about Uncle Charles. But Beth began her story, a little haltingly.

She had indeed grieved as much over Theo's disgust as over her mother's hysterics. Somehow it had hurt her more—more, even, than giving up the play and that had hurt a great deal. When her mother had summoned her to her and reminded her of her "promise" she had had no courage to beg to go on with her rôle, to argue the unreasonableness of her mother's demand, but, away from her mother, the

unfairness of it all had overwhelmed her. She had been pale herself and very quiet throughout dinner and after dinner she had followed her father into the sun-room when he settled down to read the newspapers. "No rehearsal tonight, Beth?" he'd asked her and then she had told him. She had told him of her "promise". She had seen a look of sorrow cross her father's face. He had put his arm about her and drawn her down to him. "Poor little girl. And perhaps you should have done just the other thing. Refused ——"

That had startled Beth. She did not know that her father and Doctor Waring had had a long talk.

"Refused? Why, I couldn't—mamma was dreadfully ill! It was while you were in New York ——"

"I know. Nevertheless ——" But Mr. Bradford was not ready to tell Beth all that Dr. Waring had said. He was not quite certain he was ready to believe himself that what this country doctor suggested was right. Certainly it was radically different from the diagnosis of other doctors but then, John Waring was radically different from those other doctors and he liked him, for that.

"Father! Why doesn't mamma love me?" The cry had come from Beth's heart.

Dalton Bradford's arm had tightened. "She does, my dear. I know she does. You will know it, sometime. It's—it's hideous to think for a moment that she doesn't. She's clung to a grievance until it is an

obsession with her, it's made her forget—other blessings. Beth, it's our job to clear her mind of it, someway."

Beth did not tell Theo all of that. "Mamma has been terribly unhappy, Theo. She has suffered—I hate to think of it. She's suffered because of Uncle Charles. Father made me understand that. You see he was her twin. They lived down on that lovely old place in Maryland with their grandmother who was terribly proud and brought them up to be very proud, too. Father says she must have spoiled them, let them think that every whim they had must be gratified. Charles was prouder than mamma, I suppose because he was a boy. And it seems he didn't have so much to be proud about, after all. When he was put to the test—he failed. That was after mamma's grandmother had died and they'd lost what money they had and had to sell the old house. Mamma went to New York to live with some friends and Uncle Charles disappeared for awhile. No one knew where he was until he wrote to mamma that he'd married—someone mamma thought way beneath him, for she worked in a store. Probably she wasn't but mamma had got such ideas from her grandmother, you see.

"And then mamma didn't hear from him again until he wrote asking her for more money and she sent him her share of what they'd got selling the house. And then he started with his wife and baby

for the Philippines and the ship he was on sank, and—well, most of the men went down with the ship, because they put the women and children in the life boats first but—he—he didn't. He jumped in—the first one. The captain fired at him and hit him in the arm—it was all very dreadful for the newspapers were full of it ——"

"But if he saved himself—where is he now?" broke in Theo.

"The life boat he was in leaked—and sank, just like the big ship," Beth added. "So mamma had to suffer that, too—along with the disgrace. But father says she wouldn't believe all that the newspapers printed though it hurt her terribly. It was just before I was born and she wanted me to be a boy and she was going to name me Charles and I was to be just like her Charles ——"

"But what has all that to do with your not singing?"

"Uncle Charles used to sing beautifully, mamma has told father. Even when he was a little boy he'd sing for grandmother's guests. If I'd been a boy, you see ——"

"I think that's mean," declared Theo, indignantly.

"Oh, don't say that, Theo. Mamma can't help feeling the way she does, maybe. You see, she's always been sick. Father has told me how lovely she was—before. And he thinks she'll be better. She *has*

been a little better since we've lived here. At least, until ——"

Rebuked by Beth's loyal defense of her mother Theo fell silent. The story did not appeal to her. She'd rather Uncle Charles had been a bandit or a smuggler, of a wickedness more exciting. And she couldn't see that Beth was any happier for knowing about her relative. She was ready to dismiss the matter.

"Beth, I'll tell *you* something, now. Last night, after the play, I heard Susan turn Hank Peters down *cold*—to go with Stanton Pierce to Warner's. Hank looked like two cents and as mad as anything. Wouldn't it be funny if Susan married Stanton Pierce? I mean—having it begin at the play?"

This was sweet meat for conjecture and the two girls dwelt on the possibility, even to the extent of planning Susan's wedding.

While they sat talking in the old garden Dalton Bradford was conferring again with Doctor Waring.

"You suggest I send Jeannette away?"

"Yes. You say she's been with your wife all through this. Well, she's associated too closely with what your wife must put out of her mind."

"But she can't get along without her — —"

"She can—if she has to."

"I haven't the courage," Dalton Bradford groaned. "And Geoffrey, too?"

"Yes, Geoffrey. At least put him to work here

at your plant, so that he will not be at your wife's beck and call. Let her walk ——" John Waring might, indeed, be telling Mrs. Cobb to get at the week's washing!

Dalton Bradford laughed helplessly. "How am I to put it across?"

"Would it be possible to let her think that—well, that you couldn't *afford* it?" John Waring suggested, mildly.

"Such a condition of affairs wouldn't be so far from the truth. I have been under terrific expense ever since—well, since Beth was born, and this venture here, buying out this pottery plant and putting it in running shape, will take nearly everything I can put my hand on in available money. I might ——"

"Try it. Bradford, I am convinced there is nothing organically wrong with your wife. Put her to a test ——"

"You may be right, John Waring. That may be what we never have done—put her to a test. I think ——" his eyes were reminiscent, "I think she'll measure up to it."

CHAPTER XIX

"WHY, the summer's nearly over. School's closer ahead than it is behind," Theo cried one morning, in blank astonishment.

"Summer days have wings," laughed her father, "and school days drag on leaden feet."

Theo did not answer. She was frowning into space. The opening of school meant going back into the old class, unless —— But she had scarcely looked into her books for the last few weeks.

After breakfast, with Susan and Jard gone, and Dad off on his round of calls, Theo despatched the tasks Petunia gave her with unusual swiftness. Then she went to her room to tackle her history and Latin. She sighed heavily—for outside the day was inviting. She wished she *didn't* care, about staying in the old class.

She had not seen Beth for a week. She supposed Mrs. Bradford was ill again because Dad had been called there repeatedly. She resented it that Mrs. Bradford should keep Beth away, and realizing her resentment, she grinned a little sheepishly down at the open history book. She'd started out hating Beth and now she liked her.

And, looking at the book, another thought assailed

her, disturbing. Maybe Beth would go away to school in the fall—go away without her because it was beyond her imagining that she could go with Beth.

But her mind was to be relieved on that score almost immediately. She heard Beth "coo-hoo" under her window. She leaned out delightedly and told Beth she'd join her at once. She tossed the history book to the floor.

"I can't stay more than a minute," Beth said when they were together. She looked very important. "I'm taking care of mamma."

This statement and Beth's self-conscious air made Theo gape in astonishment. Obviously Beth wasn't trying merely to be "funny". While Theo was struggling to find a voice Beth went on: "Hasn't your father told you?"

"No," Theo articulated, bluntly.

"We're poor, Theo." But there was excitement rather than tragedy in Beth's tone. "Oh, I don't mean that we're likely to starve, or anything like that. It's a long story and I must talk fast if I am to tell you everything, and, somehow, I must tell you. I suppose it's because I never knew anyone before to whom I could tell things that I always want to rush right off to you. Theo, it seems that father's been struggling along for quite awhile not knowing where the next cent was coming from and here mamma, I mean we, were spending a great deal of money, with Jeannette and Geoffrey and all those

maids, and traveling everywhere. Poor father hated to tell us, especially mamma—I suppose because he thought it might make her worse. We did have a dreadful time over it. When he told Jeannette that he couldn't afford to keep her any longer Jeannette was terribly angry—she's been with mamma, you see, for so long, and she told father he was heartless, that mamma couldn't live without her and father got a little angry, too. I suppose because he's worried about it for such awhile, without saying a word. But Jeannette's gone. It was all distressing—I was frightened, only father told me he knew mamma would be better without Jeannette. I think your father told him that. And when mamma asked him who he thought was going to take care of her he said: 'Why not Beth?' Theo, I shut my eyes, then, I didn't want to see mamma's face. But she's letting me do little things for her—and your father told her she'd feel stronger if she walked around the house more and ate her meals with the rest of us, downstairs. And she's doing that, now—though she looks very miserable about it. And yesterday I coaxed her to take a little walk with me, just down the block. I don't think she did it because I wanted her to so much as to show father and me that his reverses—that's what he called them—were not going to kill her. She talked about that other time—when they had to sell the old place, how she'd held her head up through that. Maybe pride helps sometimes,

Theo. Theo, I shall not mind how poor we are if—if mamma acts as if she felt better."

Theo suddenly remembered what her father had said, about what he'd do if Mrs. Bradford were Mrs. Cobb. And now circumstances were writing for Mrs. Bradford almost the same kind of a prescription Dad had wanted to write.

"And, Theo, now that we haven't any extra money to spend, father can't talk about my going away somewhere to school. I shall go to school right here in Merridam—with you." And Beth's voice told Theo that that was what she had come to tell. "Do you think they'll put me in the Junior class?"

"I'm not so sure of getting into it myself," Theo groaned. "If I'd only failed one exam I could go ahead with a condition, but two —— And old Piper's down on me, and Miss Ames, and all of them."

"I'm not behind in Latin but my history's funny," Beth laughed. "The history books I studied weren't a bit like the ones here, father says—even the ones he studied when he went to school. Theo—why don't you teach me history and that will help you review it?"

"Me?" It was too astounding a suggestion for Theo to take in all at once.

"And I'll help you with your Latin. We can work the first thing in the morning before mamma needs me. You can come to my house and I'll come here, in turn. It'd be fun."

Theo was not quite sure it would be fun to go to the Bradford house—the embarrassment of her recent luncheon there was still vivid in her mind. However, it might mean that she'd go into the Junior class. And, too, she was flattered that Beth thought she could teach her. Altogether it seemed an acceptable proposition.

"I'm afraid our swimming and all that is over," Beth sighed, though the glow on her face betrayed that her regret was not deep. "I'll be too busy to play about much. I'm going to help Thekla with the work. We're letting two of the maids go, too, you see, and Geoffrey's going to work at the plant. Shall we begin studying tomorrow?"

Curiosity gave Theo courage to go to the Bradford house the next morning. Approaching it she felt surprise that outwardly it should look the same, that it should still be the nicest house in Merridam. Its lawn was clipped smoothly and trimmed about the walks and drive, its windows shone and in the sun-room she could see the lovely chintz of the wicker furnishings. To Theo poverty meant living like the Maginnesses, in squalor.

Beth met her at the door, importantly. "I've dusted downstairs," she said as if it were a big achievement. "Shall we study in the sun-room or in my room?"

Theo chose the sun-room. Mrs. Bradford was not likely to hear them, there, she remembered.

They earnestly tried to make a beginning. In finding out what Beth knew and what she didn't know Theo discovered the same lack and treasure in her own fund of knowledge. That the balance was on the deficiency side did not trouble her, with the sun pouring in on them and making more vivid the lovely colors about them. They tried not to talk about other things, with creditable success. But Beth had to tell Theo that, the evening before, mamma had sat with them downstairs, for a little while.

"Father asked her to. Theo, it was sort of pathetic. He looked so happy when she did. And when I made her hot drink for her when she went to bed she told me it was all right. Jeannette had always made it for her and I was terribly afraid I couldn't fix it to please her."

Theo felt again that pity for Beth she had felt the first time she had come to this house. But she could not give it words now any more than she could then.

"We'll work harder tomorrow," they agreed when their hour was over. And Theo hurried away, fearful, perhaps, that, if she lingered, Mrs. Bradford might appear.

She had not said anything before Susan and Petunia of the ill-fortune that had overtaken the Bradfords. Somehow she shrank from their sharp questioning. But finally she spoke of it to her father.

"Will they have to move out of that house, maybe?"

Dr. Waring was seized with a sudden fit of coughing. "Oh, I guess not." He looked a little intently at Theo's worried face. He opened his lips to say something and then closed them with a little chuckle that made her in turn look sharply at him.

"Oh, I don't feel so sorry for Mrs. Bradford—it's Beth. If they get terribly poor, it's going to be hard on her ——"

"Not so hard as you think. Relativity makes a saving balance in this world. Beth's—um—poverty may bring her joys she rates as more worth having than the few comforts she may have to give up. Sometimes sacrifice can be very sweet."

His argument did not satisfy Theo. Why, poor Beth had been sacrificing all her life and she couldn't have found it particularly sweet!

She longed to talk it over with Jard and she sighed, thinking how little, now, she and Jard "talked over". With the play over, Jard in his scant leisure followed occupations which did not include her. Often he spent his evenings in his room, which Theo thought queer, considering how much more pleasant it was out-of-doors. She worried a little about it, wondering if Jard shut himself up to have a "spell".

To make the beds was one of Theo's vacation tasks. She usually rushed through her work, smooth-

ing her own and Dad's and Susan's with no thought to Petunia's injunction to give them a good airing, but she always lingered in Jard's room, re-arranging his collection of books and knick-knacks with proud, fond fingers. Jard had built a shelf for his own books, different volumes he had asked Dad to give him from the study downstairs and others he had bought, himself. And Theo read and re-read the titles with the satisfied conviction that no other boy in Merridam had such fine-sounding books, all his very own. Putting his room in order, one morning, she found his waste-paper basket filled with scraps of paper, not so small but that she could see writing on them. She knew, then—Jard was writing, evenings, when he shut himself up here, alone.

She felt a little thrill of excitement and pride and at the same time a stab of remorse when she remembered the beautiful essay and what had happened to it. After that, each morning she examined Jard's waste-basket, hoping for like treasure. And then one morning she peeped into an old note-book he had left on his table. It was full of all sorts of odd scraps of paper but none that seemed to be important. She was about to close it with a little disappointment when her eyes caught some familiar words written on one of them. She caught it up, and read more. She hunted out the other sheets that belonged to it. Why, it was his "Unsung Heroes". It was the original essay, the one he had written first.

There it was, exactly like the copy, at least almost, for on this there were lines drawn through some of the sentences and words added on the margins. Theo hugged the sheets of paper to her, exulting. Here was proof for Mr. Piper and those others! Proof, indeed. The old puzzlement over why Jard had not stood for his rights did not bother her now. Her fighting spirit tingled all through her just as it had that afternoon in the old orchard when she heard Joe Brace's voice, knew that he was approaching. She folded the papers and slipped them into the pocket of her dress.

CHAPTER XX

ON A Saturday morning, ending a week of almost incessant rain, Beth was patiently repeating important battles of the Civil War while Theo, equally patiently, corrected her from time to time. "No—Beth, Gettysburg came *after*——.No, Beth, Yorktown was in the Revolution." Theo held the history book resolutely before her and as resolutely held her eyes on the open page.

"So this is the school-room," laughed Dalton Bradford, appearing suddenly in the wide door of the sun-room.

Both girls looked up with frank relief. Theo threw the book down. Whenever she saw Mr. Bradford she searched anxiously for some sign in his face of his change of fortune. But, curiously, to her thinking, he was thriving on it; he looked younger—and jollier. She couldn't understand that. Whenever Dad was worrying about someone who was very sick he looked older and his face got tiny wrinkles in it.

"You really shouldn't interrupt us," Beth reproved with dancing eyes. "But we're very glad you did."

"And I don't care how many battles have been fought, you two youngsters should not shut your-

selves indoors on a summer day," he reproved with mock sternness. "What has happened to all the good times you were having? I don't hear you talk about any of them, now."

"Father, you know ——" Beth's face flushed a little. She looked at Theo and then back to her father. "I've told Theo everything, so she'll understand. You know, father that I can't leave mamma—not for very long at a time."

Dalton Bradford sat down in a chair close to Beth. The jolly look left his face. He lowered his tone.

"That's just what I came home for. I've been thinking that you felt like that, Beth. I've—well, I've talked it over with Dr. Waring. I know that you are putting your whole heart into taking care of your mother—but it's exactly what you must not do, for her own good. You'll soon have her as dependent on your sympathy and affection and tending as she was on Jeannette's. And that won't do. She's better—and we must help her by teaching her to help herself."

Beth's face fell. Her lips quivered a little and her father took her hand and patted it. "I want you to trust me, my dear—and trust Dr. Waring's judgment. I am trusting it wholly. Now—this afternoon. Why don't you girls go on a fine bust? A picnic, or something like that. Forget your books and—everything."

"I've told mamma that I'd walk with her ——"

"I'll come home and go out with her. In fact there is no reason why I should go back, today. Suppose you run off with Theo now. And don't you dare appear home until dark. There—those are my orders and I insist that they be obeyed."

Both girls laughed at his sternness. And Theo saw Beth slip an arm around her father's neck and give it a quick tight squeeze. He looked so pleased that Theo knew Beth did not do it very often.

Never did a holiday offer such allure as this unexpected one. "Let's go up to the Island," Theo promptly suggested. "Maybe Jard will go with us —he doesn't have to work this afternoon." Her thoughts went ahead to what might be coaxed from Petunia in the way of food. Bacon, to cook on a fire. Thick slices of bread to make bacon sandwiches, lemons for lemonade ——

They overtook Jard at the bridge and invited him to go with them. Theo noticed the slouch of his shoulders and hang of his head—he was in one of his black spells but when they hailed him he flung his head back a little defiantly. He'd go, he answered to their invitation, spoken in unison.

Beth lunched at the Waring house, eating in the kitchen with Theo and Jard, for Susan was staying on at the Library to catalogue some new books and Dr. Waring had driven over to Stockton.

They walked across the fields to Jasper's landing. He demurred a little at giving them the boat though

he was likely to have no fares on a Saturday afternoon. "Water's high," he warned. But Theo laughed at that—hadn't she managed the boat time and again in the spring when the river was at its highest?

Now Jard made no offer to take the oar. "You work, today," he laughed shortly, when Theo looked at him, hesitating.

It was a fragrant, golden afternoon. The trees along the banks fairly bent under their burden of foliage, richly green after the heavy rains. The air was mellow with the fruiting of summer, fair-weather clouds sailed lazily across the bluest of skies and made dancing shadows in the water. And these three young people appeared one with the mood of the day, care-free, judging from their faces, every small worry forgotten. There was no trace now on Jard's face of the "spell" Theo had glimpsed when they met him on the bridge. Beth had the eager joyousness she had shown on their first picnic. Apparently Theo had thrown off all concern over history and Latin. She wore her old knickers, and the faded khaki blouse; as she stood in the stern of the little boat she looked more than ever like a young boy, a gypsy boy, with her black hair blown into a wild mop around her tanned face and her strong brown arms, bare far above the elbows, dexterously but lazily swinging the long oar.

In the bottom of the boat was a basket packed with their supper. Just looking at its bounty added to

Theo's feeling of the rightness of everything. Petunia had been liberal.

They never ate that supper, however.

They were gathering firewood when Jard exclaimed, frowning in a puzzled way: "Why, Theo—look at the river!"

The river had changed its smiling face. Now it looked as if swelling sinister torrents were stirring beneath it.

"Why, it's *lots* higher! I was sitting on that old tree trunk—and now you can't see it!" Theo cried, her eyes round with astonishment.

"Jard——" The cry was Beth's. "The boat's gone!"

Theo and Jard looked where Beth pointed. The boat was swinging crazily around and around about three yards from the shore.

"I pulled it up as far as we ever do," Jard growled.

Theo, looking at him, felt her heart turn sick. In its every line his face showed fright; he was scowling and looking this way and that, frantically and helplessly. And Theo saw that Beth was looking at Jard, too, her own face paling with alarm.

"Oh, I'll get the boat," Theo cried, forcing a laugh. She began whipping her blouse off over her head.

"Oh, Theo, don't, *don't!*" Beth implored clinging with both her hands to Theo's bare arm. She

was staring in terror at the rapidly swelling river. Already the water had risen to where they were standing.

Theo felt no fear—except for Jard. And that was mixed with anger, a cold, disgusted anger, at his trembling, at the sickly green of his face. Jard—like that! Her every sense was alert. She did not stop to wonder why the water was rising so rapidly—she only knew that they must get to the shore. She knew, too, that there was not time to rescue the boat, even if that were possible, which each instant appeared less likely.

She shook Beth's hands off. "We've got to get—over there." She nodded her head toward the new Merridam side of the river. "Quick as we can. We've got to—swim."

"*Swim!*" cried Beth.

"Yes. Don't you worry—you know how to float. Jard and I can get you across. Only—don't hang on to us! *Hurry*, Jard. Take some of your clothes off. Take your shoes off, Beth, and your dress. *Hurry*, I say."

Theo's voice was commanding—and steady. She had kicked off her own shoes and thrown them down with her blouse. "Come on! Hurry. *Jard!*"

Her tone stung him to action. He discarded his outer clothes. Beth had already slipped off her dress and was fumbling with the tie of one of her shoes. "*Break* it," Theo ordered.

"*Now*, Jard, you take Beth on that side ——"

They plunged into the water. Beth choked back a scream and struggled to keep calm. Theo beat out with a long, strong stroke with one arm, gripping Beth with the other. Jard swam on Beth's other side.

But it was not the river they knew—strange eddies caught them and held them. Beth struggled in sudden panic and must have slipped away from the other two except that Theo tightened her hold.

Then Theo heard Jard give an angry cry and saw him strike out alone. He had left Beth to her.

"I can't do it," Theo thought, desperately. Beth seemed a dead weight and her free arm felt powerless as the current of the river repeatedly swung her away from the shore. The water stung her eyes —no, it was tears. There seemed a dull roaring in her ears—no, they were voices, shouts. She shook the water from her eyes—someone was on the shore —Jasper. Maybe Jard. He'd got across! Oh, why *didn't* someone help her! "We're drowning!" She thought she'd shouted it but she had made no sound. "I—can't." She sobbed in her throat. Beth clutched at her hair and together they sank into the eddying water.

CHAPTER XXI

A SUMMER Saturday afternoon usually was very quiet in Merridam. The stores—along Main Street—closed until seven o'clock when they opened again for the farmers coming in from the countryside. The mills and brick plants and the new pottery plant closed. The Library closed. Those of the village who had cars rode off to the open and those who did not sat on their porches.

On this summer afternoon Dalton Bradford had persuaded his wife to walk with him. It was only down the block to the corner and back but he felt something of the same thrill Beth had—as if he had accomplished some great achievement. And then he had coaxed her to sit with him in the sun-room.

No miracle of cure had been wrought by Dr. Waring's prescription—Mrs. Bradford was still fretful, still certain that she was a very sick woman, still exacting. But her pride had been quickened, that pride that, less than twenty years ago, had helped her through the breaking up of the home that had belonged to her people for over a century. She had faced that through and she would face this. She might die without Jeannette's ministrations but she would endure it.

She looked very small and very pathetic in the wide wicker chair and it touched Dalton Bradford profoundly to see her there and to know the effort she was making and why. He felt guilty and inclined to tell her the truth—yet he knew at the same time that it might undo the beginning they had made.

"Where's Beth?" she asked. She had asked it a dozen times. He told her again that Beth had gone home with Theo.

"I've been thinking about Beth's school—what we ought to do," he said on a sudden impulse. "Perhaps she ought to go away somewhere. She's outgrown tutoring—anyway, she needs the companionship of schoolmates."

Always before Beth's education had depended entirely upon Mrs. Bradford's mood. Tutors came, annoyed her, were sent away, after which Beth was entered in some private school, only on a sudden whim to be summoned back to Mrs. Bradford. She had stayed longest at Frau Federlein's because Mrs. Bradford with Jeannette had gone temporarily into retreat at a sun-cure sanitorium.

It had been one of Dalton Bradford's worries that Beth was not going to an American school, with American girls. He had counted it one of their sacrifices. And now the opportunity had come. But suddenly he realized that to send Beth away to a boarding school when he could not afford to keep Jeannette was scarcely consistent. He reddened with embar-

rassment and waited for the reproach he felt he had every reason to expect.

But Mrs. Bradford did not reproach him. "I don't want Beth to go away," she said, with almost childish petulance. "I want her home. She'll have companionship enough in that Waring girl. She can go to the school here—it must be a good school if Dr. Waring lets his daughter go to it."

And Dalton Bradford wished Beth could have heard her mother say that! "I don't want Beth to go away. I want her here."

"I'll talk to Waring about the school, here," he agreed quickly. *He* did not want Beth to go away. If the change John Waring promised in his wife really happened, it meant a happy home-circle and he was hungry for just that with a hunger that had carved the deep lines in his face and grayed the hair on his temples. Laughter in his home where there had been no laughter ——

He was reading to his wife—a practice Beth had instituted after Jeannette's going—when he heard someone running down the walk. He saw a man jump over the railing of the porch across the street and join the first. And then he saw others running, hatless, coatless.

"A fire, maybe." Yet he had not heard the shrill siren of the village alarm.

The telephone rang. He answered it himself. It was Geoffrey, at the plant.

"The dam at Stockton's burst, sir. No danger to the plant, but what had we ought to do?"

"*Beth!*" was Dalton Bradford's first thought.

He must get to the other side before the bridge went out—Beth might be at the Warings. There was no danger of any flood reaching the Waring house for it stood on high ground, like his own, but he wanted to see her, safe. He told Geoffrey to meet him with the car at the Corners.

"What is it?" Mrs. Bradford demanded when he went back to her.

"A man from the plant. A little trouble—will you be all right with Thekla?"

He waited only to summon the girl, then, like the others, he ran down the street, hatless. The alarm had come by telephone and it seemed that almost all Merridam was gathering on the main street. Already men and women and children were carrying household possessions out of the cottages that stood along the river, some half-frenzied, others stern-lipped and calm. Martin Brace was giving superfluous directions to everyone within sound of his voice.

Dalton Bradford shoved a way through the crowd, ignoring it. Geoffrey was at the bridge with the car.

"Go to the Warings. Beth—I don't know where she is."

But the Waring house was deserted. Petunia had

gone to a neighbor's, for a little visit. There was no sign of Theo or Jard or Beth. Dr. Waring's car was not in the garage.

Geoffrey suggested Jasper's landing. He knew the way there. They'd have to walk across a field ——

But they reached the landing only to find it deserted and the boat gone.

Dalton Bradford stared with horror at the river. Perhaps ——

"We'll go back and up on the other side—where that Island is." His voice sounded queer in his own ears and he saw Geoffrey give him a quick, horrified glance. They ran back across the field to the car and Geoffrey drove it through old Merridam with desperate speed.

They made a way through the crowd on Main Street. As they turned to go up the river road many voices shouted warnings to them. Someone leaped on the running board. "The dam's gone at Stockton —you can't get through. That road will be under water ——"

Dalton Bradford pushed him off without a word.

After the young people went off with the boat old Jasper had sat on his bench in front of his shanty and watched the river. He didn't like its looks. A foreboding of disaster ached through his bones. He scanned the stream as far up it as he could see. He

squinted his old eyes and measured the distance across.

After a little he rose and stretched his arms speculatively. Well, he'd swum once two mile from the Maria S, to escape a drunken boatswain. He went inside and reappeared after a moment, his body naked to the waist. He walked down to the landing and slid off it into the water.

He made the other side at what cost of pain he was to know later. He had carried an old shirt in a roll on his back but it was wet; nevertheless he put it on. And then he started, half-running, half-walking up the river road. He swore as he went, which was as near praying as Jasper knew.

He met a stranger on the road. "What's wrong, old fellow?" the stranger asked, genially, amused at the old figure. He himself was dusty from tramping.

"Come along," Jasper commanded, without stopping. Another pair of strong arms might come in handy. "Someups wrong with things ——"

The stranger turned with Jasper, laughingly asserting that he had nothing more exciting to do. When he realized something of Jasper's alarm his stride went forward faster than Jasper's so that the old fellow was a pace or two behind him.

They ran the last half-mile, Jasper's breath coming and going with a harsh, rasping sound.

They reached the bank opposite the Island just as Jard climbed up on it. But Jasper scarcely saw him.

His eyes had gone from the boat, now far downstream, to Theo's head, sometimes above the water and sometimes not.

"God A'mighty!" the old man cried hoarsely. He pushed past the stranger and Jard.

But it was not Jasper who reached Theo and Beth as they sank beneath the swirling, rushing water. Another figure had plunged into the river after Jasper, cut through it with long desperate strokes and reached Theo, loosed Beth's strangle hold. "Take her," he cried, to Jasper, as the old man came up. And together, they got the two girls to the shore.

Both Theo and Beth were exhausted and frightened almost to unconsciousness. They were lying limp on the bank when Geoffrey came up with the car. Dalton Bradford had leaped out before Geoffrey brought the car to a stop.

"Beth," he cried, kneeling down at her side, gathering her up in his arms. "My precious!"

But Geoffrey remembered the warnings of the villagers. Already the river had risen to a level with the top of the bank. He shook Dalton Bradford's shoulder. "There isn't a minute to lose, Mr. Bradford," he said hoarsely. He turned to the others. "The dam's out—at Stockton. Pile in—everybody."

Jard and the stranger lifted Theo into the car, Dalton Bradford carried Beth. The others climbed in. The car tore over the rough road, swaying from

side to side, slipping, sliding ditchwards to leap out and on.

"Faster, Geoffrey, faster," muttered Bradford. He sat beside Geoffrey, with Beth in his arms, straining her to him.

And Geoffrey increased his speed. It was a race—with a force mightier than the intricate, powerful mechanism of the throbbing engine.

They won. They did not stop in the village where the crowd was larger than before. Turning sharply off from Main Street Geoffrey swung around the block and approached Center Street from the opposite direction.

"Come in—all of you," Dalton Bradford commanded. He had forgotten Mrs. Bradford, now. As he said it he was carrying Beth up the steps.

"I'm all right," Theo protested, struggling to her feet. Jard slipped an arm around her to steady her. The stranger, of whom none of them had been aware, looked at Jasper.

"There's work for us," Jasper muttered. He was a strange figure in his wet clothing, but no one thought of it. The stranger nodded. And Geoffrey nodded, too. The three men went away, together.

Thekla and Mrs. Bradford and Dinah, the cook, met them in the hall. It was Thekla who screamed in affright, not Mrs. Bradford. "She's all right, Laura. She's all right. Dinah, fill some hot water bottles—Thekla, make a hot lemonade—at once.

Now, to bed with both your girls. Jard—go to my room and take a hot shower and find some dry clothing ——"

Dalton Bradford's controlled voice compelled order. And presently Theo found herself in the guest-room bed, warm under the soft silk comfortable, sipping the hot drink Thekla brought to her.

"I'm all right," she asserted sturdily. "It wasn't —anything." But even as she said it she began to tremble violently. "Oh—Jard!" For of all the horror the worst seemed that moment when Jard left Beth to her. That came back to her now, in an agony of realization.

"Now, he's all right, Miss Theo. I heard him moving around. You just be quiet."

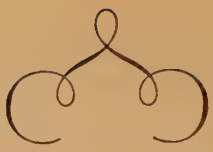
It was worse when Thekla went out. Theo bit her lips to keep back her sobbing. She wouldn't cry—she *wouldn't*. It was silly, cowardly. But Beth—maybe Beth was dying. It was likely ——

In another room Beth lay on a bed so exhausted that Mrs. Bradford thought she was dying. She pushed Dinah away and knelt by the bed and drew Beth into her arms. "My baby ——" she moaned. And Beth opened her eyes and smiled a wan little smile.

"She's going to pull through this, wife." Dalton Bradford put his hand on his wife's shoulder. Tears were running down his cheeks but there was a warm glow in his eyes. "But we have much to thank God

for ——" More, perhaps, than the fact of Beth's rescue. "Now—we must keep steady. Can you spare me—I may be more needed, down in the village."

Downstairs Jard accosted him. "I'm going with you." Dalton Bradford, looking at the boy's white, set face, had an impulse to tell him to remain in the house but he desisted. Afterwards the boy would not want to think that he'd stayed behind with the women.



CHAPTER XXII

BY NOON of the next day the flood water was receding, leaving along the banks where homes had stood a muddy waste of débris. Merridam drew its breath and took account of itself. The crest had not reached the higher ground of Main Street or the better homes of the village, no lives had been lost. And the bridge had held against the force of the escaping volume of water with its burden of uprooted trees and twisting logs and plankings, fragments of sheds and cottages, tables, chairs, beds, that ludicrous yet pathetic toll of floods.

Martin Brace's committee had housed the homeless families. Dalton Bradford gave him a generous check to meet their needs and others followed his example, in smaller figures but with equal generosity of heart. A community spirit hovered over Merridam; little animosities and jealousies were forgotten for the time. The village had much to be thankful for. It hadn't suffered as Stockton had. The mills and brick-yards had been damaged only slightly.

The actual details of the flood did not touch the Bradford house. Theo had thought only of Beth—and of her own sick horror, locked away in her

heart. When she couldn't longer endure the quiet she had slipped out of bed and into Beth's room. And there she found Mrs. Bradford sitting by Beth's bed. Beth welcomed her with a weak, glad smile.

"Oh, Theo ——" The two girls hugged each other.

"I'm—hungry," Beth said, then, releasing Theo.

So Mrs. Bradford went down herself and superintended a dinner which Thekla and Dinah carried up to the room on trays and served from a little table, hovering anxiously over the two girls. And Mrs. Bradford ate with them.

With the food a little color crept back into Beth's cheeks and Theo's set lips relaxed. They even laughed, over nothing at all, and every now and then Beth's fingers found Theo's hand and squeezed it. As Dinah and Thekla were gathering up the dishes she had whispered to Theo: "I'm happy—isn't it awful to feel happy right now?"

That was as near as she ever got to telling Theo why she was happy. There was something too sacred, too sweet, in that moment her mother had called her her baby to tell it to anyone.

"Where's Jard?" she had asked suddenly and Theo had felt her heart contract painfully. But Beth had only concern for Jard—if she had been aware of Jard's cowardly desertion of her in the water she had forgotten it.

"He went with Mr. Bradford," Thekla informed them.

It was late when Dr. Waring came to the house, his face strained with all he had gone through. He had lingered in Stockton to give first aid, then driven rapidly back to Merridam by a roundabout way, ascertained that Susan was at Molly Steven's and seeing Dalton Bradford in the village heard from him that Theo and Jard were safe.

His coming roused Theo to a realization of what actually had happened. But he told her little more than that there had been no loss of life—and that in a day or two they could cross the bridge. She felt so safe with Dad holding her hands that she even enjoyed a little excitement over everything.

"Will we have to stay *here*, Dad?"

"I think you will—Jard can stay at the Clapps. Susan is with Molly Stevens."

"Dad, I'm not a bit afraid of Mrs. Bradford," Theo whispered. "She's—why, she acts just as if she were *well*."

"She's forgotten herself—at last," Dad whispered back.

She could talk to Dad about what had happened at the Island—though not all about it. And then suddenly she remembered Jasper. "Dad—where's Jasper? He saved us—where is he?"

"I saw him in the village. But the poor old fellow's shanty has gone, of course."

"The boat, too," Theo cried. "Oh, Dad—find him. He's so old—where will he live?"

Dr. Waring patted her hand. "He'll live with us, my dear, until we can find some other place for him. No, we won't mind what Petunia says," he laughed. "She won't say much when she knows what the old fellow did for us."

Theo was almost a little sorry when, the afternoon of the second day after the flood, her father came for her. She might have been parting with Beth after the pleasantest of visits to judge from her leavetaking. But she sobered as they drove slowly through the village and cautiously across the bridge and she saw the desolation of the river banks. She brightened, however, when her father told her that Jasper had been comfortably established in the spare room and that Petunia was waiting on him as if he were a king.

"But I am afraid the old fellow is very sick," Dr. Waring added gravely.

He did not tell Theo any of the circumstances of his finding Jasper. Inquiry around the village had given him no inkling of Jasper's whereabouts until he had chanced to ask Katie Stewart, the waitress at the Greek restaurant on the Corners. Katie's home had been swept away by the flood and Katie was so red-eyed with weeping that Dr. Waring had stopped to ask her concerning her family. And then he had asked her if she had seen old Jasper. She'd shaken

her head in answer—like the rest of Merridam she didn't think old Jasper mattered much. Then, on an afterthought, she had called out to Dr. Waring. "Mebbe he's the old one up in Joslyn's barn ——" She'd told him of a stranger who'd bought coffee from her that morning and had begged the use of an old pail to carry it to Joslyn's barn. The stranger'd told her there was an old fellow there with him, sick.

John Waring had found Jasper in the abandoned barn Katie had designated as "Joslyn's". And with Jasper was the stranger. The stranger had wrapped his coat about Jasper but, even with it, the old fellow was shaking with chill and babbling incoherently.

"He's been like this most of the night. He jumped into the river—yesterday, to rescue some youngsters ——"

"I know," John Waring had broken in abruptly. His face was grave. "We must get him out of here —— My car is handy. If you'll stay with him ——" He had looked inquiringly at the stranger.

"I've stayed with him since he commandeered me as one of his rescue party," the stranger answered with a slight smile. "A few minutes more scarcely will matter ——"

Dr. Waring had taken time to give the other man a searching, interested look. He saw a thin, straight figure, and a likeable face, despite a somewhat cyni-

cal mouth and sombre eyes. His clothes were very shabby. "Down on his luck," was John Waring's passing thought. He had dismissed any further speculation on the stranger and gone at once for his car.

The stranger helped him carry old Jasper out to the machine. John Waring had noted the tender way he handled the old man. "He's a brave one," he had commented and there had been a curious wistfulness in his voice as he said it.

"May I give you a berth until things have straightened out here?" Dr. Waring asked, hesitating. "Or —a lift, somewhere?"

"Thanks, no. I have no particular destination and it has been so long since I set foot in any home that I'd feel too strange," the man answered, with a little laugh.

But as John Waring closed the door of the car the stranger put his hand on his arm.

"Just tell me—who is this girl they called Beth?"

"Dalton Bradford's daughter," John Waring answered promptly. He felt no surprise at the other's curiosity; naturally, having been with Jasper at the rescue, the man was interested.

The stranger drew back with a fleeting smile. "Thanks," he said politely.

Then John Waring had given all his thought to getting Jasper into a warm bed.

Theo ran up to the spare room at once. Jasper's grizzled head showed above Petunia's most-prized

patchwork quilt, the face mottled and the eyes under the bushy brows bright with fever. He did not know Theo or do more than turn from the kiss she placed on his leathery forehead.

"Oh, Dad—he won't even know when I thank him for—for ——"

Theo constituted herself as Jasper's nurse, carrying to the bed the hot broths Petunia made, even trying to feed the old man. She knew nothing of serious sickness except that it called her father away at all hours of the day and night. But her love and gratitude made her hands tender and dexterous, her voice low and soothing, her eyes quick to note every smallest change.

"Will he get well?" she asked her father the third day.

Dr. Waring put his hand on Theo's shoulder. His first impulse was to deceive her—and then he knew intuitively that Theo could stand up bravely under the truth. This Theo he had been watching these last few days.

"There is only the smallest chance. I doubt even that. But, Theo—don't you think the old man, maybe, will be happy—to go like this?"

He felt a quiver go through the girl. But she did not cry. "I wish—I wish—I could just talk to him—before—I mean, so's he'd understand me ——"

Jasper lingered through the week—a strange week for Theo, for she was unconscious of the hours,

or of day and night, or of Susan's and Petunia's endless, excited talk of the "flood" and where so and so were staying. She had forgotten Beth and Jard, everything that had so held her a week ago. She went to bed only when her father ordered her to do so and was awake before any of the others, creeping softly to Jasper's room to find her father sitting by the bed.

On Saturday, as she sat alone with Jasper, she saw his eyes fixed on her, with recognition in them, saw a little lift of the old lips, as if Jasper were trying to smile at her. She knelt by the bed, slipping one arm around the man's swarthy neck. "Jasper, you know me! You're *better*."

"Then—you're—all—right?" the old man muttered.

"Yes, yes, of course. I'm all right—I wasn't sick a bit, afterwards." Theo struggled, now, to keep back her tears. It seemed as if she were drowning with tears but she mustn't let them loose ——

"The boat ——"

"Oh, we'll get another. We'll build you a house, too, Jasper—a nice one, like the other. Oh, Jasper, there isn't anything we won't do for you. If it hadn't been for you —— You saved us, you saved Beth and me ——"

The old man fixed his eyes on some point in space. The brows drew down over them. He was trying to think. And suddenly he remembered every-

thing. He shook his head. "Twasn't me—'twas Jard —*he* got to you—first."

"Jard?" The cry burst from Theo. She straightened, quivering. Now the tears ran down her face, unchecked. She laughed and sobbed, all at the same time. *Jard!* She hadn't known. She'd been close to despising him—Jard.

She drew her arm away. "I must tell Dad—you're better." But it was Jard she must find ——

She ran down to the kitchen where Dad was drinking some coffee at the kitchen table. "He's better, Dad—lots better. He knew me—he talked to me. Where's Jard?"

But of course Jard had gone to work. She could have cried aloud in her impatience.

Dr. Waring pressed her down into a chair. "Better have a cup of coffee, yourself, child. I'll go to Jasper."

When John Waring entered the room old Jasper lay quiet under the patchwork quilt. The little twist of the lips that was as near as he could manage to a smile still lingered. And John Waring knew he was dead.

CHAPTER XXIII

IT WAS not until after Jasper's funeral that Theo said what she would say to Jard.

Jasper was buried from the Waring house. A simple service was read over him in the old parlor and the Warings, and Petunia and Dalton Bradford and Beth followed him to the burying-ground. Petunia wore her funeral hat, heavily draped in rusty black crepe, for she held it seemly that someone in the little group of mourners should appear in what she called "weeds".

At the grave Theo and Beth stood side by side, their faces wet with tears. Theo was remembering the hours upon hours when she had played at Jasper's shanty, listened to his stories.

As they turned away Theo heard her father greet a man who had joined them, quietly, and stood, his head bared, through the simple service. When Dr. Waring spoke to him he answered briefly, and strode off at once in an opposite direction.

Dalton Bradford looked after him. "Curious that he should be here. I saw him at the plant this morning. Geoffrey says my superintendent has given him work. But I remember—wasn't he with Jasper and the children—that day at the river?"

John Waring told as much as he knew.

Theo and Beth, walking a little ahead of their fathers, paid no attention to this conversation.

The old house seemed strangely quiet when they went back to it. But Theo had something else to do than grieve. She touched Jard's arm timidly. "Jard —come on down to the Wildwood. Please. There's something—I want to tell you."

She had not been in the Wildwood since that evening in spring when she had sat there and planned to run away. When she had first thought Jard a coward. The memory of it came back now to embarrass her. He wasn't! Oh, he wasn't! But it was hard to begin —— She felt strange and shy with Jard—as if all the happy companionship and confidence between them had been long, long ago, as if—as if, why, as if she were different, now.

"Well—shoot," commanded Jard, humping himself against a tree trunk.

"Jard—it's hard to say it—but—I almost hated you—because you left Beth—in the water. I—I didn't know, until Jasper told me—that it really was *you* who came out to us ——"

Jard made no sound. And looking at him she saw a red flame in his face.

"Jard," she said softly. "You were wonderful! And I'm going to tell Beth ——"

"Don't you do anything of the kind!" Jard blazed, angrily. Then to her horror she saw the muscles of

his face working with emotion. He dropped his head on his arms. He was *crying!*

"Jard, please—what's the matter? Tell me, Jard."

"Oh, it's nothing. Shut up—I mean." His body shook with a sob.

"It *was* something, Jard." Theo's voice was grave and mature. "And it was a *big* something, for you to come back for us. The bigger—because I know how afraid you were!"

"Did you know?"

"Yes. I've always known—how you were afraid about lots of things. But you couldn't help it. And maybe you won't be, now—now that you know you can dare ——"

She put her logic awkwardly but earnestly and Jard threw up his head to look at her. His face was wistful, twisted with emotion.

"Honest, do you think so, Theo? I've despised myself—ever since I was a kid. I've *hated* myself for a coward—for a—a—sissy. That's what I was. But I didn't think *you* knew ——"

"I never thought you were a coward until ——" Theo bit her lips. She hadn't meant to say that.

"Until when? Go on. Say it. You can't make me feel any worse than I do."

"Well, that day Beth fell out of the boat. You looked so funny. And—and—well, once I sort of thought of it, remembering the day I fell out of the

tree. But that wasn't anything—we were just kids, then. Of course you were just afraid I was hurt."

Jard frowned off to the fields beyond the stream. "Do you s'pose a fellow's born like that—afraid of some things?"

"I s'pose so. Petunia's afraid to death of snakes and so's Susan, and Molly Stevens's afraid of thunder and lightning."

"Those things don't count—I mean big things, risky things, that maybe'll hurt you. Oh, well—it isn't any excuse. But, Theo, if I—if I hadn't gone back after you and Beth, that day—well, I'd have run away. I'd been—*through.*" He dug his heel viciously into the soft moss-earth under his feet.

"But you *did* go back!" Theo's voice was warm and proud. She caught Jard's arm with her two hands and shook it a little. "And you're not going to be afraid of anything now—not of *anything!*"

A little of her glad confidence lightened the look of trouble in the boy's eyes. But he shook his head. "I can't be sure—it'll be a fight, always, I suppose. Theo ——" He was eager, now, to unburden his whole load. "Theo, I guess you knew I did write that old essay—I guess you knew it, all right."

"I knew it. And I guess I knew why—why you wouldn't say so ——"

"You did, huh? You knew it was because I didn't have the guts to fight it out with Joe Brace?" Jard's

relentless scorn might have been for someone other than himself!

Theo flushed. She didn't like going over it all, though it was sweet to have Jard talking to her like this. She nodded, looking very conscious, because suddenly she remembered that the original draft of the essay was at that moment hidden under her stockings in her bureau drawer.

"You knew it—and didn't think I was a—a fish?"

"I didn't understand—exactly," Theo admitted. "But I didn't think you were a—fish."

He looked at her intently, a shy admiration and affection and wonder kindling his glance. "Say, Theo, you're an awfully decent kid. You know—you're so loyal to a fellow. And don't you think I don't realize it."

"Why, why wouldn't I be?" Theo retorted, laughing. She laughed to cover the little shake in her voice. All the worry that had ached at the core of her heart dissolved now into a happiness that hurt with an exquisite pain. She could shed quarts of tears from sheer joy, but Jard must not see that—he'd think she was silly. So she blinked them back and laughed again.

"Well, it isn't every fellow who has a kid sister who stands by him, the way you do me. That ought to make something of me—if nothing else does." Jard was staring and frowning and blushing—his ready expression seemed to fail him now in this mo-

ment of deep feeling. He twisted a coarse blade of grass in his fingers.

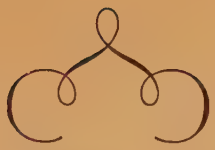
"I'll guess you'll be something without my help," Theo insisted stoutly, smiling broadly. Dr. Jard Waring. She wondered if Dad had talked to Jard about it. It wasn't likely, because Jard had told her he wanted to be a writer. But couldn't he write, too?

"Guess it's most supper-time," Jard suggested after a long silence. But he did not move at once. "It'll seem funny, won't it—with old Jasper gone and his boat and his shanty ——"

Now the tears sprang to Theo's eyes and brimmed over. She did not try to hide them from Jard. "It seems sort of like meaning something, Jasper going now. As if all the kid things we've always done—had gone, too. It seems sort of—as if we'd grown up, all of a sudden. I guess I've had what Petunia calls growing pains, off and on, all summer." And Theo laughed ruefully, remembering some of her pains, that had been heart-pains, indeed.

"*You* grown-up!" Jard snorted, with a teasing, wholly affectionate smile of ridicule upon her. "You're a long way from that, kid."

Theo retorted with a: "Oh, is that *so!*" outwardly indifferent to his teasing. But deep in her heart was a faint prick of disappointment that Jard recognized no change in her. Probably her growing pains had *not* meant any growth, after all.



CHAPTER XXIV

DIRECTLY after the flood the Gazette offices had hummed with unwonted activity. Jim Dorrance had run three extra sheets of news which never had happened in the life of the newspaper. "Wouldn't mind something happening a little oftener in this town," he had averred in Jard's hearing. He did not try to hide his elation that the press of the Stockton Bee had been seriously damaged by water. He knew to a cent how much it was costing his rival to have his paper printed in Hartford.

But soon his fund of news was exhausted. Jard had heard him lamenting the fact. "Now, if I could dig up a whooping story," Jard sighed to himself.

He had been telling the Bradfords and Theo how Jim Dorrance would relish more excitement—another flood, or a fire, or a plague, with which to fill his columns.

Theo and Jard had been invited over to the Bradfords for lunch. Theo, contrary to Jard's command, had told Beth how Jard had come back for them. And Beth had told her father. What Dalton Bradford had said to Jard no one would ever know for Jard would not speak of it. But the older man

showed his affection and his gratitude in every glance and word he gave Jard.

Today Beth was particularly gay and proud, because she had cooked the lunch, under Dinah's supervision. Because of that Dalton Bradford had come home, reinforced, he said, with a bottle of digestive tablets. Mrs. Bradford ate with them, too, and no one felt embarrassed or surprised by her being with them.

Neither Theo nor Jard gave a thought to the last time they had lunched here. As usual Mrs. Bradford had pressed Jard to tell her of his work.

"Oh, it's the same old thing," Jard had admitted, coloring a little. But he told them, then, how Jim Dorrance yearned for material.

"Why don't you find a scoop around here?" laughed Mr. Bradford. "Present it to Dorrance and demand that he make you editor of his paper."

Theo did not know what a "scoop" was but the quick lighting of Jard's face told her that he knew.

"That's exactly what I'd like to do," he answered so quickly that Dalton Bradford was interested.

"I might put you on to a story. It'd be something. There's a chap at the plant—he wandered in a day or two after the flood and asked for employment. I recognized him afterwards as the man who was with Jasper—that day. I talked with him and found him very interesting. It seems he's been something of a rover, lived for a good many years in

China and picked up some secrets in the making of pottery. I put him to making some experiments. I'm satisfied that it's going to give us a product that hasn't been made before, to my knowledge, in this country. I'll take you to him and let him explain it."

Jard looked frankly disappointed. Theo, hanging on Mr. Bradford's words, looked disappointed, too. There didn't seem a very exciting story in *that*.

But Jard thanked Mr. Bradford and said he'd like to meet the man. Anyway, thought Theo, Jard would enjoy hearing this man talk about China ——

It was agreed that Jard should go out to the plant that afternoon.

"I wish we could go through the plant," Beth exclaimed. "I've never been ——"

Mr. Bradford laughed. "Well, I don't know any reason why you shouldn't. I know of nothing dangerous—or secret. I never thought you were interested. Suppose I send Geoffrey after you, say, about four o'clock?"

After Mr. Bradford and Jard had gone and Mrs. Bradford retired to her room to lie down, Theo dragged Beth to a secluded corner, obviously excited.

"Beth, maybe you'll be rich again—maybe this new thing your father spoke about will make you rich. He sort of acted as if he thought so ——"

Beth stared at Theo. To Theo's astonishment her face fell. "I hope not," she answered, finally. When she saw Theo's expression, she laughed. "That

sounds funny—but I mean it. Of course I don't like to think that father has to worry—but, Theo, I don't believe he is worrying. I believe he feels the way I do—that he'd rather be poor than to have things the way they were. You see we weren't happy, then. Theo, do you remember something I told you, that first day I met you? I remember, I told you and Susan. It was something father'd said, riding out to your house. That we could make any place we lived in a castle. I think we're learning how. I love this house, now—it seems like home. It seems to belong to us."

Theo pondered this. Certainly this house did seem more like someone's home, now. There were no hushed voices in it, no frightened tiptoeing —— And she had to agree with Beth that her father did not act like a worried man.

Beth went on: "I'm so glad father decided to come here. If this had happened somewhere else—his losing his money, it might not have been the same—at least I might not have felt the same. I sort of looked at things, differently, before. Little things mattered that now do not seem to matter, at all. I think it's knowing you, Theo. You're so—well, you're so natural. I liked you, the moment I saw you, that day at your house."

At that Theo flushed darkly. That wasn't the first time—that day. She had to tell Beth, now, that she was that girl they'd found in the road, fighting. And

with confession facing her she saw that girl as Susan and Dad and Jard must have seen her, and Petunia and all of shocked Merridam, a girl, fifteen years old, John Waring's daughter, fighting! That moment that she had almost forgotten returned vividly to shame her.

She looked down at her hands so as not to see the aversion on Beth's face. "That really wasn't the first time," she said in a thick voice. She told her story, beginning with her intercession for Charley Parker and ending with the ignominy of Beth's arrival on the scene. And as she told it a cold fear spoke in her heart. "Maybe she'll hate me, now."

But when she had finished Beth laughed, excitedly. "That girl was you? It's funny I never thought of it. I suppose I was too tired from riding to remember anything. And you knocked him down?"

"Well, not exactly. He made a pass at me and I dodged—and he fell. But—I hit him."

"I'm glad of that. I remember him—at Commencement. I didn't like him. I'm glad I didn't dance with him. But, Theo—how did you dare? Hit him, I mean."

It had been easier, Theo realized now, to follow the impulse born of her anger, than to give Joe Brace's taunt the indifference with which she should have met it. She had not shown any courage! She disclaimed it with a shake of her head.

"I'm such a coward—I'd probably have run away

when I heard them coming," Beth laughed. "But *you* wouldn't ——"

The tone of Beth's voice warmed Theo. Beth didn't think less of her for her confession. Maybe, someday, she'd tell her that out of the disgrace of that afternoon their friendship had been brought about. She knew that—remembering Susan's engineering.

At four o'clock Geoffrey appeared to drive them to the plant. "Maybe mamma'd like to go," Beth said, her foot on the running board. She went back into the house. Theo waited in the car for ten minutes while Beth coaxed her mother to go.

There was more delay over light wraps and cushions—Mrs. Bradford had not recovered so entirely but that she believed the least draught of air might hurt her.

And, but for that delay, while Beth hunted out the softest cushions and the lightest wraps, the day might have held no great happening.

Jard had gone to the plant earlier in the afternoon. A little shyly he had presented himself in Mr. Bradford's office. And at once Mr. Bradford had sent a messenger to bring in William Verne, the stranger who had come into his employ.

When he came in, Dalton Bradford introduced Jard to him. "He is interested in your experiment, Verne. Can you give him a story about it—for the newspaper he represents?" Dalton Bradford winked

at Jard as he said it. Then he turned back to the pile of letters on his desk.

"You are the plucky boy I met at the river," William Verne said as they left the office. "I am very glad to meet you." And when Jard flushed uncomfortably, he added: "Don't like to be called plucky, eh? Well, it's better than another word I know. So you're interested in pottery?"

Jard explained that he knew nothing of pottery, but that it had been Dalton Bradford's suggestion. He was looking for some story for the Gazette, the town newspaper. He worked there—oh, he didn't do much.

"A story? Mr. Bradford thought I could give you one?" A cynical smile flashed across the man's face. "Well, we'll see what we can get."

A small shed had been given over to the stranger for his experimenting. Thither he led Jard. From a shelf in the shed he took down a dull bowl of soft lustre. He held it carefully in his hand.

"Looks hundreds of years old, doesn't it? Looks as if it held all the romance and suffering and striving—all the living of a forgotten people, doesn't it? Well—it's new." He said it, almost scornfully. "It's an imitation of the priceless thing of the past. But people will buy it and put it on their tables and think they've been to China ——"

Jard had listened and looked only with a half-interest and some impatience. Surely there was no

story for him in that dull piece of pottery! But something in the man's tone quickened his attention. A sort of anger. And China! That was a magic word for Jard. It spelled adventure.

"You lived in China—Mr. Bradford said." He wanted William Verne to talk about that and not of the pottery.

"Lived there? Yes, if you'd call it living. It gave me shelter. And I was grateful. Yet now I am betraying those who took me in. It was a remote spot as far from Occidental travellers as I could find. I had thought to lose myself entirely. I labored as they labored ——" The man still held the bowl in his hand and was turning it over and over, frowning down at it.

"Why did you come back?"

"Why? What is there in the human make-up that drags the murderer back to the thing he has killed?"

He said it too calmly for Jard to believe he really had killed anyone. He looked his understanding and Verne laughed shortly. "I hadn't hurt society much, my boy, I'd killed only myself—the man I'd been. But nevertheless, the urge to see where that other one had lived was too strong to be resisted. I came back to the States."

Now Jard was wholly interested. His face betrayed it and sympathy, with it.

"But why—if you didn't want to do it—did you *make* that bowl?"

"I've asked myself that, too. It is a price I'm offering —— But, here, I'm not helping you with a story, am I?"

"Maybe you'd rather not tell me anything, if you feel that way about it," Jard put in, hastily.

The man put the bowl back on the shelf. "How did you know that? You're an unusual lad, Jard. I'll give you any kind of a story if you'll let me off telling you how I made the blue bowl. If Dalton Bradford takes it over—well, let *him* give you the processes, let anyone, other than myself. I will be grateful. One does not like to bare one's weaknesses, you know. What will you have—a first-hand tale of famine?"

He had moved toward the door and Jard followed him. Outside the sun was shining down on the cinder-spread yard. They emerged into it just as Geoffrey swung the car around to the door of the frame building where the offices were.

Jard felt the man's hand clutch his arm, felt it trembling.

Theo and Beth from the car called to Jard, waving their hands. Then Mrs. Bradford, straightening suddenly from her pillows, gave a sharp, shrill cry.

"Charles!"

CHAPTER XXV

IT WAS Mrs. Bradford's brother—the twin brother who had been drowned sixteen years ago ——"

Theo was recounting to an audience of Petunia, Susan and Dad the dramatic meeting in the yard of the pottery plant.

"*Drowned* ——" laughed Susan.

"Yes, drowned," Theo repeated, annoyed that Susan should laugh at this point in her story. "He was on a boat on the ocean that sank and some of the lifeboats sank, too, and the newspapers said he had drowned, with lots of others. But he hadn't. The boat he was in drifted and drifted for days and finally a sailing vessel—a 'wind-jammer', he said, picked it up and carried the folks in it to Australia ——"

Theo was plainly suffering even in the joy of telling the story. Her eyes appeared to be bursting and her voice came on a thin remnant of breath. She quivered as she sat on the edge of her chair, a plate heaped with food untouched before her. Eat—at such a time!

Susan and Petunia shared her excitement. Petunia had spilled the gravy over the table cloth and paid

no heed to the grievous sin. Susan was making little sounds of appreciation. Jard's eyes were dark with interest. Only Dad listened quietly.

Already Theo had given full justice to what had happened, before Charles Weathering, the lost brother, had told his story to Mr. and Mrs. Bradford, Beth and Theo, in Dalton Bradford's office. Jard had slipped away but Beth had clung so tightly to Theo's hand that she had had to go with them into the office.

Mrs. Bradford had not fainted! Theo had given that fact emphasis. She had sprung unassisted from the car and run over to her brother where he stood, pale as a ghost, waiting for her to come to him. She had flung her arms around his neck—and laughed!

"I thought she'd cry terribly but she didn't. And she hung on to him as if she'd never let him go. It was Beth who looked as if it was a ghost or something."

"But why hadn't he let his sister *know* he was living?" demanded Susan.

Theo hesitated. To reveal that meant telling Beth's secret. However Charles Weathering had told everything frankly. Perhaps to leave Petunia and Susan in doubt would bring more discredit on him than the truth, for which he had suffered. "Well, you see, he'd jumped into the first life boat. His wife and his baby were in that one and he got so

excited that he—he didn't think what he was doing. But afterwards he saw it was overcrowded and he jumped out again, into the water—and another boat picked him up. And he was so terribly ashamed of what he'd done and heartbroken because he'd seen that first life boat upset with his wife and baby in it, that he didn't want to be alive, himself. He just wandered everywhere, living in Australia and China, most of the time. But I guess he was terribly unhappy and always wanted to come back to this country. So he came. He'd called himself William Verne and he didn't think he'd ever meet anyone who knew him. He was on his way from Boston to New York—sort of—walking—and then Jasper met him —that day."

"I remember ——" It was Dr. Waring now who broke in. "I remember his asking me who Beth was ——"

"Yes—Beth was his mother's name. Mrs. Bradford's mother. He knew—then. Beth Bradford. And he stayed here. He said something held him. He wanted to see his sister but he didn't want her to see him. But now, I guess, he's glad. I felt terribly sorry for him. After he'd told everything he asked Mr. and Mrs. Bradford if they wanted him to go away. Imagine, his thinking that they would! And I think it's dreadfully sad—his losing his little baby and his wife. I hope the Bradfords are nice to him."

"It is very likely that they will be," Dad assured her, smiling.

By the next day at least half of Merridam knew that Mrs. Bradford's brother had come to the village under the name of William Verne and had taken employment in Dalton Bradford's plant. More than one had seen that meeting in the cinder-yard. And more than one had seen William Verne drive away in the Bradford automobile, sitting next to Mrs. Bradford. And Jessie Stevens, who served Dalton Bradford in a secretarial capacity, had not, on Mr. Bradford's dismissal, walked so quickly away from the office door but that she had heard a word or two of that strange conversation.

Old Dorrance of the Gazette summoned Jard in to him. He figured that the Warings were thick with the Bradfords and might know something about it. A story in the Gazette would look pretty nice and it was going to press that afternoon. A story—before the Stockton Bee got ahold of it!

"Weren't you over at the Pottery plant yesterday afternoon?" he asked Jard. Jard thought the question superfluous as he had had to ask his employer permission to go there. He answered briefly that he was.

"Maybe you saw this chap they called Verne."

Jard flushed uncomfortably. Yes, he had.

"Well, maybe you know they say he's Mrs. Bradford's brother?"

Jard nodded.

"Maybe you know all about how they met, yesterday, Mrs. Bradford and this brother?"

Jard did not nod at that but his color deepened. And Jim Dorrance saw that.

"Maybe you know all the facts. There's a good story in that, my boy. A man doesn't go around under another name when he's related to big bugs like the Bradfords, unless there's a reason—a darn *good* reason, too!"

Jard's stubborn silence betrayed him. Mr. Dorrance tucked his thumbs into his suspenders and chuckled.

"You sit down and give me that story now and I'll raise you. I've been calculating to take on some wide-awake boy to help me with the paper. Sort of do reportin'. Get news. I'd sort of thought of Joe Brace—seeing he'd won that essay contest last spring at school. But if you'll give me the stuff now—what you know—I'll give the job to you. That's a nice bargain, isn't it?"

Now Jard's color faded. He opened his lips to speak, then closed them. His eyes dropped from his employer's face to the floor.

"We'll keep it just between ourselves, Jard. No one'll know where I got my information. Of course I appreciate that you'd feel more comfortable with it that way. Now this is your chance for a nice start. The Gazette's growing—and I'm growing, too,

growing old. Maybe you'll be the boss here, some day."

Still Jard hesitated. Dorrance smiled greedily while he waited, watching Jard.

Then Jard flung back his head. "If I don't give you the story ——" he began, haltingly.

Dorrance released his suspenders with a snap. "If you *don't* —— Well, you can take your lunch box and go home. That's that."

"All right." Jard swung around. He let the door slam behind him as he went out of the office.

He walked homeward faster than was his wont. He had a wild desire to run. His heart felt curiously jubilant in spite of his dismissal. His little dream had crashed but it left no regret—just now. He knew Dorrance would have let no one know from what source he'd gleaned his facts but he hadn't told, he hadn't! He hadn't been tempted—even for a moment!

Theo met him at the house. She was lingering near the telephone waiting and hoping for a word from Beth.

"Why—Jard! What's the matter?"

"I'm through." Jard would have preferred to tell no one what had happened but there was no escaping Theo's insistent questioning.

Theo's answer was incoherent with mingled wrath and pride. "He thought he could get you to tell him all about that poor Charles Weathering? The

old snoop, the old worm! Of course you wouldn't. Let him give the job to Joe Brace—it's good enough for him! It's his sort of work. As if you wouldn't cut your tongue out 'fore you'd breathe a word ——"

Jard's eyes were shining. "That's exactly the way I felt. I could have stood there and let him torture me before I'd have given anything away."

Theo knew intuitively what that triumph meant to Jard. The ugly, threatening fear was vanquished in her own heart as well as Jard's. His triumph was hers.

She flung her arms about his neck. "Oh, Jard, you're wonderful."

He liked her embrace though he quickly wriggled out of it. "Gosh, Theo, you'd make a fellow believe he was a hero if he listened to you! Well, I'm out of a job. I'm glad school begins soon."

"Jard ——" It was the moment to tell him of Dad's dream. Dad would want her to tell him right now. She poured it out, breathlessly. College—and a hospital. Dr. Jard Waring—like all the Warings of the past. "You'll come back here, just as Dad did and I'll keep house for you."

But she saw him stiffen, saw the glow die out of his eyes. Her heart sank. "Jard ——" she begged, questioning.

"I'd hate it," he answered briefly. "I've always wanted ——" He bit his lip on what he would say.

But Theo knew. "You want to write—things. But can't you do that, anyway?" She was pleading for Dad's dream.

"Do you see Dad having time to do anything else?" he retorted. His face betrayed his inner struggling, his eyes sober with a man's soberness before a crisis and his mouth boyishly trembling and uncertain.

Theo had no answer. No, Dad certainly did not have time to do anything but doctor sick folks. But she was remembering Dad's face as it had looked when he'd talked to her. "Your mother and I used to talk about it when Jard was a baby." It was an old, old dream—and it must mean a great deal to Dad because he hadn't talked of it.

Jard threw back his head. "Well, if Dad's set his heart on it I suppose there's nothing to do about it." He wheeled around but not before Theo saw the suffering in his face. "Don't you go telling Dad anything about what I've said—I mean, that I said I'd hate it."

CHAPTER XXVI

I SUPPOSE," mused Theo, resignedly, "after one is almost sixteen one always has something to worry over."

Had not Petunia been worrying about things as far back as she could remember? Her bread, or Dad's feet, whether or not they were wet, and, if they were wet, whether or not he'd catch cold, and, if he caught cold, whether it might go on to his lungs and snuff him out. Innumerable things had Petunia to worry over! And Susan—Theo knew that Susan's chief worry now was whether Stanton Pierce liked her better than he liked Molly Stevens! She must be worrying about that because she was not worrying about little things, like the ink she'd spilled on her new dress. Susan always had fussed so over things like that.

To worry was the lot of grownupness. "It's just one thing after another——" That was Petunia's frequent summing up. Theo borrowed the phrase now. It was like that—one worry disappeared and another took its place and made the last one seem like nothing. She'd worried over her grade in school and then Beth's promise not to touch a piano and then Beth's poverty and all of these worries had

shrunk to unimportance beside her great fear for Jard. And that in turn had been downed only to give place to a new worry, a sad, sorry sort of worry. Jard would be Dr. Jard Waring but he'd hate it, because he wouldn't be doing what he wanted to do. She was torn between concern for Jard and loyalty to Dad's dream.

She was so quiet about the house that Petunia said maybe she was coming down with something, measles, likely, for the Cutting young one had had measles three times and it would be like Theo to get 'em just now when the plums and the tomatoes were ready for canning. And Theo thought that measles, even as she remembered them, would be preferable to the torment of her worry for Jard.

Theo had plenty of time to ponder Jard's situation because she had lost Beth temporarily. Beth was very "busy" with a new member added to their family. Beth called her frequently on the telephone but these communications were more aggravating than satisfactory, always leaving Theo in greater suspense. "Theo—he—*you* know—is going to live right here with us. Oh, he's ever so nice! I can imagine what he was like—before —— We're going to—but I must wait until I see you to tell you." Each conversation ended like that.

Then, one morning, Beth telephoned to invite Theo and Jard and Susan and Dr. Waring over to

dinner. "It's a birthday party," she declared, but refused to enlighten Theo further.

Theo was excited but a little fearful. Perhaps the new state of affairs at the Bradford house might make things different. So much had happened —— Perhaps Beth might not be the confiding friend any more.

She dressed with conscious concern, brushing her black hair to a tidy smoothness and carefully adjusting the once-despised ruffle and belt of the dress Matilda Maple had made for her. She stared a little wistfully at herself. If only scrubbing could change her face to a lily fairness ——

Jard was eager, too. His eagerness was to meet Charles Weathering again. He had told Theo of their curious conversation in the little shed. "I understand now just what he meant. You see those people he'd lived with had taught him how to make the bowl. And that secret was the only thing he could offer to stay there at the plant. And he hated it—telling it. I hope Mr. Bradford won't make him."

Beth met them on their arrival. "How nice you look, Theo!" she cried, hugging her carefully so as not to disarray Theo's "niceness". There was nothing changed in her manner. But when she whispered: "I can't wait to talk to you alone, Theo," Theo had a prick of apprehension.

The parlor was festive with flowers. Everyone

was gay—Beth laughed at everything and nothing. Mrs. Bradford laughed, too. Laughter in this house there was at last!

At the table Jard sat next to Charles Weathering. His face revealed his pleasure at this honor. "How's the newspaper job going?" Theo heard the older man ask. She turned away that she might not see Jard's face. But she heard his answer, ready enough, half-laughing. "Oh, I'm through there."

"You like to write? Seems to me Beth told me that you did. Good—we'll talk more about that. I've been cheating loneliness these many years through that medium ——"

Theo began to talk very fast to Beth that she might not hear any more of what Charles Weathering said. But had Dad heard it? She was afraid to look at him.

Immediately after dinner Beth took Theo to her room. "Oh, Theo, he's too wonderful to believe—Uncle Charles." She whispered it although she had closed her door. "He's—he's so understanding. I suppose because he's been so unhappy. And mamma—Theo, she's like another person." There was a little awe in Beth's voice and a wonder in her soft eyes, as if she were speaking of things approaching miracles.

But Theo felt neither wonder nor awe, rather impatience. Of course Mrs. Bradford ought to be another person now that her brother was back and

not drowned. She ought to be ashamed of the way she'd pretended to be sick all these years and made Beth make such silly promises. The main thing was —what more had Beth to tell her?

"We've been making such beautiful plans—at least they seem beautiful because we all are agreed on wanting them." When Beth paused Theo thought "Now!" and steeled herself. "We're going back to Maryland. Father's going to buy back a part of the old place there—it's what was called the lodge when mamma lived there and it's for sale—father has found that out. You see we're afraid it may be too cold here for mamma during the winter; anyway she and Uncle Charles are very homesick to go back to where they were so happy together. And Uncle Charles is going to get together a lot of things he's been writing. Father thinks he can sell them. He had sent one thing on to a New York editor and he got a letter back asking for more. And I'm going to a school quite near there where mamma went when she was a girl. And, Theo, I'm going to study music! *At* last!" Beth clasped her hands in an ecstasy of joy. "One evening mamma asked me to sing. She asked me to sing the song I was going to sing in the play. And I did. And Uncle Charles sang with me. He has a lovely voice. And, Theo, he liked mine. He said I ought to have it trained. And mamma said that I could take lessons, in voice and on the piano, too. She looked so sad and—and

sorry that I cried like a silly. But Theo, that isn't all ——" And Beth paused again.

But Beth's joy had made no echo in Theo's heart. She had listened with a feeling of emptiness. Well, this was exactly what she had feared might happen! She was glad, of course, for Beth, but infinitely sorry for herself.

"But, Theo, that isn't *all* ——" Beth said again, laughing at Theo's face. "Father is going to persuade your father to let you go down with us—and go to that school with me. And, Theo, we're coming back here in the spring—Father says he wants to be back with the apple-blossoms and mamma does, too. This always will be—our home. Oh, Theo—*say* something. Say you'll coax your father to let you go. I'll be broken-hearted if you don't."

"I—don't know," Theo answered stupidly. Her heart had quickened its beat at the first suggestion of such novelty and of being with Beth but almost at once a deep inner doubt had stilled it.

"You goose—to say you *don't know!*" Beth gave her an affectionate little shake. "Well, father will use all his powers of persuasion. Theo—one more secret. We're not poor—not desperately poor. That was something your father advised my father to pretend—for mamma's sake. He looked just like a guilty schoolboy when he confessed it. But I'm glad he did it. It taught us all something."

For the rest of the evening the talk circled and

eddied about Theo, but she had no part in it. She scarcely heard what anyone said. Her mind was dwelling entirely on what Beth had told her. They were going away for the winter—until apple-blossom time. Long, long months, for so they promised to be, now. A school in Maryland—a boarding school—Theo's ideas of a boarding school were built entirely on stories she had read. To go there with Beth—but of course she couldn't go! But what if Dad said yes when Mr. Bradford tried to persuade him? She felt little prickles of excitement under her skin and at the same time that doubt in her heart. Would Susan let her take her trunk? She'd have to have some new dresses. And a new coat and hat. And shoes. She'd ride all night on a train. Would she be homesick, maybe? In the stories the heroine always was homesick and the girl in the next room always heard her sobbing and came in and comforted her and afterwards became the heroine's best chum. But *she* wouldn't be homesick for she'd have Beth. But, maybe, she wouldn't go ——

Anyway, she told herself, behind the fixed smile by which she shielded her absorption from the others, anyway, she'd look *funny* in a boarding school, graceless, a girl with no promise of blossoming, with no gifts such as Beth had ——

Petunia was waiting up for them, eager to hear all about the birthday party. Theo slipped out to

the porch—she could not bear Susan's excitement just then. She sat down on the porch step.

"The chicken was boned, Petunia—you could eat it to the last bit —— And the salad was in cunning little nests ——" On and on Susan's tongue raced, covering the details of the dinner, of Mrs. Bradford's and Beth's clothes, even the distinguished appearance of Uncle Charles ——

Moonlight filtered down through the great trees of the garden, making a moving pattern of silver across the ground. Already there was a smell of fallen leaves in the air, mingling with the rich fragrance of ripening fruit. Above the sound of Susan's voice and a far-off barking of a dog lifted the crickets' plaint. "Fall's coming. Fall's coming."

The mood of the night met Theo's mood. Fall—and school, the same old school, with the same old teachers and the same old tiresome grind of studies. And Beth away ——

Well, Beth had begged her to tease Dad to let her go. She would. Maybe he'd let her. He'd sent Susan to the State Normal. She'd tell him how she hated to go back in the same old grade again, with Miss Ames.

But what would Jard do without her? The question sprang at her and she knew it had been in her heart from the very moment Beth had suggested her going away.

She frowned into the darkness. It was silly to

worry about Jard needing her. He didn't, now. She'd tease Dad ——

She gave a little start when Jard dropped down beside her.

"You out here dreaming?" Jard laughed, teasingly.

But his laughter was forced and Theo, recognizing that, did not make any retort. She waited, her eyes on Jard's face.

"Isn't Charles Weathering a peach?" he asked in a low tone. "Did you see the blue bowl there in the parlor, Theo?"

She had not seen it. "It was there—and I asked him about it. Mr. Bradford isn't going to make them, after all. That's darn decent in him, isn't it? They're all going away. Did you know that, Theo?"

Did she know it? But she only nodded.

"He's going to write down there. Theo, he said he'd like to read some of my stuff. But what's the use?" Jard made a little growling sound in his throat. "He wants me to go down and visit him over Christmas," he added, the words tumbling out on one another.

"Oh, that would be wonderful!" Theo exclaimed.

"But I told him I couldn't go."

"Why not? Dad would let you ——"

"I suppose so. It isn't that—what's the use? I've made up my mind to be a doctor, as long as Dad's set his heart on it, and it would only make it

harder —— No, I'm going to forget all that other thing."

He spoke with a sturdy resolution but it did not entirely cover a tone of sorrow in his voice. Theo heard it. She put her hand impulsively into Jard's.

"Beth wants me to go down there with her and go to some school. Mr. Bradford's going to ask Dad to let me go. But I'm not going, Jard—what's the use? I'm going to stay here. It's sort of nice ——"

CHAPTER XXVII

I AM not going." That answer had come from Theo's heart, for her mind had been quite made up to go, to tease Dad to that end. And saying it aloud settled it.

It had been easy to say it because she had been clinging to Jard's hand. And even when she was alone in her room it did not hurt to think that she wasn't going away with Beth. She did not undress. She sat in her window staring out at the moon-lit night, thinking.

There was that other world to which Beth beckoned her, new friends, like Beth, new scenes, alluring in their novelty, but here was Jard, needing her, Jard, giving up his precious dreams that Dad might not be disappointed. Oh, she was *glad* she was not going away.

The moon-frosted shapes outside took on comforting familiarity. The tree that brushed her window—it had grown with her and Jard, the old garden, softly shadowed now, had been their happy playground. The house—what had Beth said about it? A castle—that was what she had called it. It was funny to call *this* house *that* but Theo knew what Beth had meant. If one was happy living in a place

it made of it a castle. But how about Jard? *She* might be happy living here until she was old, like Petunia, keeping Jard's castle for him, but how was he going to be happy?

He'd said he was going to forget that "other thing". But could he? She went to her bureau drawer and took out the sheets of paper on which Jard had written his essay. She held it in her hand, looking down at it through a mist of tears. Maybe he'd never write anything again like it.

She felt no hot resentment now at Joe Brace. Somehow, now, what Joe Brace had done did not seem to matter. It had not hurt Jard as much as it was going to hurt him, giving up what he wanted to do. And Jard had the courage to do that.

Slowly she tore the papers into small pieces. She felt as though she were destroying something alive, killing it. She dropped them into her waste basket where they lay, a little drift of white.

Dr. Jard Waring—she repeated it sadly. Poor Jard. And poor Dad—for she remembered how Dad's face had looked, that day he had told her about his wanting Jard to go on after him. She remembered how *she* had felt, listening, all a-tingle. But poor Jard didn't feel that way. If —— A sudden thought seized her, flooding over her sympathy for Jard, quickening her very breath. She'd ask Dad —— Why not?

But it was crazy to think of it, even. Dad would laugh!

However she wakened the next morning, thinking about it. She hugged the thought to her, sometimes in a panic of uncertainty, when she held her breath, sometimes with that little tingle of exaltation. If Dad *didn't* laugh ——

She told Beth that she couldn't go away with her. "There isn't any use asking Dad. I—can't."

"I don't believe you *want* to go," Beth cried. "You don't act even a little bit sorry."

"No—I'm not sorry," Theo answered honestly. She told Beth, then, about Jard, but she did not tell Beth what she was planning to do. She could not put it into words.

Already there were signs of flight about Beth's room. A trunk stood open next to her bureau. Some of her dresses were spread out on the bed. Theo saw it all but with no sadness.

"Father and Uncle Charles are going down to Broadfields tomorrow. But mamma and I will not go until the middle of September. The school does not open until the first of October ——" Beth was so brimming with eagerness that she could not hold it in, anymore than she could wait to pack her trunk. But she flushed, in sudden contrition. "Oh, Theo, I'm going to miss you terribly! But the winter will pass quickly and I'll be back in the spring. We'll *always* be friends, won't we?"

Theo assured her that they would. The winter would not pass quickly for her—there was no one in Merridam to take Beth's place. But, if Dad *didn't* laugh, she'd have enough to do and think about to fill the long hours of the white days. And when Beth came back maybe she'd have something to tell her!

For the next few days she followed her father about the house, her heart in her throat. "Dad ——" she began, again and again, only to falter when Dad gave her his attention.

Then, the day before school was to open, Dad asked Jard to drive to Stockton with him. "I'm going to see old Mrs. Cass. She's been ailing all summer and maybe I can cheer her up a little."

Theo heard her father ask Jard and saw Jard's quick frown. "I was going with Phil ——" he began, then shut his lips.

"Oh, Dad—let *me* go," she implored. "I'd *love* to go. Please."

Her father smiled at her, a little surprise on his face. "All right, scamp. Come along."

Dr. Waring drove slowly over the rough road that skirted the river. He did not talk much. "He's planning what he'll say to Mrs. Cass," thought Theo, beside him. Or no—of course Dad was disappointed because Jard had not come with him. Maybe he had wanted Jard to go so that he could talk to him about —about his being a doctor, someday.

She, herself, was incapable of even the lightest chatter. She could think of only the one thing. Words aplenty tumbled around in her head but could not escape her lips.

She wished Dad had not called her "scamp". It made what she meant to say to him seem crazier than ever.

They passed the old orchard across from Jasper's landing. The trees hung now with round red apples. But Theo did not see them for she turned her head away from them, hot with embarrassment as she remembered that foolish hour she had lain there, cherishing a vision of blossoming.

They reached Mrs. Cass' house, a dreary cottage in a dreary, neglected yard. Mrs. Cass lay on a bed under a huddle of grimy blankets. Theo could see her from the kitchen. And she could see the brightening of the old face when Dad went into the room.

"Is she—very sick?" she asked her father, afterwards.

"Mrs. Cass? No—not very." He explained the woman's situation. A daughter lived with her but worked somewhere through the day. Mrs. Cass had to depend upon neighbors' dropping in on her now and then.

"If they'd open her windows——" Theo said impulsively, then colored, consciously. Dad would laugh at *her*, making suggestions!

"Exactly," Dad answered, evidently pleased. "I left just that prescription."

Theo squared herself in her seat. She must say something—they'd be back in Merridam in a little while. She must say something. She swallowed, desperately. "Dad ——" she began. "Dad—I'm worried—about Jard."

She had not meant to begin that way. The wrong words had come first. And she did not have time to find the right ones for Dad was looking at her questioningly, waiting. "He—he wants to write—I mean, when he's through school. Like Mr. Charles—like, well, like all those people who write all the books and things. And, Dad, he writes beautifully. He thinks of the nicest things and he knows how to say it in words. Dad, he wrote that essay that Joe Brace read at the Commencement. I saw it—in Jard's handwriting. Joe stole it—I guess to get even—with me ——"

Oh, she hadn't meant to tell that! She had no right to tell it, to expose Jard's weakness. She looked fearfully at her father.

His brow was creased with tiny wrinkles. Just so had he looked that day after Martin Brace had stormed his study.

"He wrote it, did he? And he wouldn't stand up for his own rights? He'd see someone walk away with the honor that should have been his?"

"Oh, Dad, it's because he hates a fuss! And he

didn't care as much about the honor as just—just writing it—the essay. He *isn't* a coward. He isn't. I know. Not when big things come—things that count ——"

"You know all that? *You* know Jard—so much better than I do?"

Theo flushed under her father's searching eyes. But she nodded her head. "I guess I know Jard better than anyone does," she answered gravely. "But, Dad, he'll be a doctor just the same. He told me he would—if you wanted him to—only—only—wouldn't it be too bad ——"

"I see what you're driving at, Theo. Likely he'd be a very poor doctor." Dad's voice had a queer tone but Theo would not wait to puzzle over its meaning.

"Dad—I was thinking—would *I* do?" She shut her eyes. She longed to cover her ears. It had sounded so preposterous, put into words. Now he would laugh!

Then she felt Dad's hand cover hers. She turned to him—he was not laughing. His face was aglow but it was not with laughter. And his eyes looked moist.

"Would *you* do? My dear little girl—I've been thinking just that—ever since Jasper was sick at our house."

"*Really*, Dad?" Theo's voice sang. "You're not laughing at me? I'm such a—such a ——"

"Such a what? Let's have it out, child."

"Well, I'm not pretty like Susan and Beth and I haven't any talents or anything like that ——" That was as near as poor Theo could explain her shortcomings.

At that Dad was silent for so long that Theo began to think he was weighing her lack, seriously.

"It isn't that I want to do it only so that Jard can write," she explained quickly. "I guess I wanted to—that day we talked about it. I felt so funny inside—so—so sort of eager ——"

Dr. Waring laughed now but with a laughter that caressed Theo. "You did, did you? Well, child, that eagerness, that urge, that spark—to be able to feel that over some big purpose is worth more than the prettiest face. Nor ——" and now his voice dropped to a grave note, "nor would I trade the understanding you have given Jard for the greatest talent. It's a rare gift, my girl—let it grow with you."

Theo sat very straight, her dark eyes shining. She had a gift! Dad had said so. She'd *do*. Dr. Theodate Waring—not Dr. Jard Waring. Someday ——

"Oh, Dad, I'll work so hard at school! They'll have to let me go into the Junior class at midyears. And, Dad, may I tell Jard?"

"Of course."

Then Dr. Waring affected deep consternation. "But, Theo—when did you grow into this girl I'm talking to—now? Where has my scamp gone, my gypsy—my baby?"

Theo snuggled closer to him. She laughed, the color creeping up to her eyes.

"Oh, *that* girl. I guess I left her lying under an old apple tree. Now, don't ask me to explain, Dad, for it's a secret I'll never, never tell anyone."

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